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The Godsfall Chronicles

– The Fallen God Records –

- Book 1 -
The Wastelands
(I)

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[RWX (Wuxiaworld)]

– STORY –

The nuclear holocaust which caused the collapse of the Old Times on Earth should have wiped out all human life on the planet. Yes, the gods set up their beautiful Elysiums to provide sanctuaries for their chosen, but by all rights everyone outside the elysian lands should've perished long ago. Yet somehow, human life still managed to persist, even in the deadly, mutant-infested wastelands.

Cloudhawk was a young scavenger who dreamed of being as free as the hawks in the skies, yet seemed destined to live out his life scrounging for scraps in the wasteland ruins. Fate, however, is ever-fickle. A chance meeting with a ragtag group of mercenaries changed the trajectory of his life, bringing him into a world with mutants and metahumans, demonhunters and godslayers, and even gods and demons. Cloudhawk would find his own place in a world that was far greater than he had imagined, find his own path between the zealous light of Sumeru and the whispering darkness of the Abyss… and one day, he would find that even gods may fall.

Prologue

The blazing sun was like a greedy tyrant, wantonly unleashing its deadly heat upon the wastelands and wicking away what little moisture it had left. The endless sands stretched out into the horizon, so vast as to engender despair as it swallowed up all other colors with its own drab yellowness. Waves of hot air swept through the arid wastelands, kicking up sandstorms that occasionally blotted out the sun itself. The entire world was in a state of desolate chaos, and it seemed as though the skies and the ground were of the same dull color.

The ground was filled with bits and scraps of rubble that clumped together to form small mountains. There were tens of thousands of these things, and they looked like steel dinosaurs that had been buried within the sand with only their backs visible. The passage of countless years had slowly eaten away at them, causing patches of rust to have appeared everywhere. This place was filled with scar-ridden buildings that had been utterly decimated, leaving only their skeletal frames behind, forever a silent testament to their former glory.

Thousands of years ago, this place was a city. Thousands of years later, it had been reduced to ruins.

Fifty years ago, this place had become a scavenger camp.

Who still remembered its former extravagance, its glittering opulence, its dazzling prosperity?

Who still remembered that this place was once filled with countless high-rises and towering skyscrapers? Who remembered the atomic hovercraft that had shuttled through this place, the aerial motherships that had flown in intricate matrices?

Who remembered that this endless desert wasteland was once a vast ocean that was known as the Atlantic Ocean? Who remembered the beautiful, artificial islands that had once glittered like pearls? Who remembered the many underwater cities that were scattered throughout the seabed like the stars in the skies?

And who remembered that this place once had a name? An ancient, true name that had been buried long ago by the tides of time, a name that had been completely

forgotten… New York!

Chapter 1
The Young Scavenger

The setting sun was the color of blood as it shone down upon the wasteland. The scavenging hour had arrived.

Cloudhawk woke up to throbbing spasms of pain in his stomach. This familiar sensation had accompanied him his entire life and filled many of his memories. The scavengers referred to it as 'hunger', and it supposedly was a perpetual curse which the Creator had pronounced upon all living beings.

If he once again failed to find any sustenance, he wouldn't survive the night.

As for what he would do tomorrow? This was a question which Cloudhawk had never even considered. Tomorrow… for scavengers, 'tomorrow' was an extravagant word they couldn't afford to worry about.

Cloudhawk laboriously crawled out of the burrow he had hidden himself within. When his feet once more stood atop the scorching ground of the ruins, he was suddenly struck by a strong dizzying spell. The ancient ruins around him were filled with crumbling fences and dilapidated walls, as well as scraps of corpses that had fallen down from the other worlds. The once-dazzling buildings that had been erected here had been reduced to worthless piles of rubble, buried and forgotten by both the sands of the wasteland and the sands of time.

The gaunt youth was such a tiny figure, dwarfed by the howling sandstorms that ruled this place. The wind blew through his tousled black hair, covering up his slender, youthful features. His withered frame was covered with a few scraps of dirty cloth, and his rough, callused skin was filled with wounds both new and old. His eyes, however, were clear and alert. This was the only thing which separated him from the other, ordinary scavengers.

Cloudhawk was only fourteen or fifteen years old.

Scavenger life was very simple. Spend roughly twenty hours each day hidden within a hole or a burrow, avoiding the sweltering heat and the blistering cold. Only during the

scant hours of dawn and dusk would you be able to climb out of your hole and search for food within the ruins. Day after day, year after year, this cycle repeated itself. This type of life seemed rather dull, but the scavengers viewed the dullness as an incredible blessing… because any disruption of this boring cycle almost always portended impending death.

Cloudhawk couldn't help but think about the old-timer.

The old-timer was an unconventional scavenger who had withstood the vicissitudes of time. Not only did he know how to read the language of the Old Times, he also knew many things which scavengers weren't supposed to know. He loved to tell stories and delighted in collecting useless things, especially tools, paintings, and books from the Old Times. The only one who he could share these things with was Cloudhawk, and so the two of them became each other's only companion and friend.

This morning, the sun had risen as it always did… but this time, the old-timer didn't crawl out of his hole.

Still, the old-timer was a lucky man. At least he had Cloudhawk around to bury him.

Cloudhawk didn't want to think about what would happen to him if he himself fell over. He didn't have much meat left on his bones, but starving scavengers generally weren't picky about their food. The crazy meat merchants would probably chop his body apart into eight pieces, smoke his flesh to cure it, then hang it up on their rusting steel hooks. They'd save part of the meat for themselves, trading off the rest for some mildly contaminated drinking water.

These were the wastelands. For the sake of survival, many would be willing to eat anything, do anything.

Sometimes, Cloudhawk envied the others. However, the old-timer had told him long ago that if mankind discarded its final scraps of decency and morality, the entire human race would truly be doomed.

He was so hungry he could barely walk.

Cloudhawk dragged his skinny frame through the ruins, looking like a strand of straw that was being tossed about by the wind. He felt as though he could collapse at any moment. The scavengers had long ago scoured the ruins clean. To find food was no easy task.

Would he fail in this task yet again?

Would this be his last time seeing the setting sun as well?

Cloudhawk sat down lifelessly. The setting sun was making its way down past the horizon, painting the ruins with its blood-red glow. He saw a goshawk soaring through the skies, weaving its way through the clouds, and he couldn't help but reveal a hint of jealousy in his gaze. When he had given himself the name 'Cloudhawk', it was because he wanted to be like one of the hawks that flew through the clouds, free and unfettered… but in the end, it was all nothing more than a crazy dream. Right?

Things weren't over yet.

He couldn't give up. He wouldn't give up!

Right at this moment, he suddenly picked up the sound of hurried footsteps ringing off in the distance. Cloudhawk leapt to his feet like a startled animal, unsheathing a shard of metal that he had ground sharp long ago as he vigilantly stared off into the distance. This was a chaotic, crazed era. Every single day, there would be starving scavengers who attempted to murder their own kind, and their victims were often skinny children like Cloudhawk.

And indeed, the sounds of the footsteps grew nearer and nearer until finally, three raggedly dressed scavengers suddenly appeared within his line of vision, charging towards him at high speed.

Cloudhawk's face turned pale as he took two steps back. He was now so weak that a strong wind could knock him down. Three scavengers were attacking him at the same time? There was no way he was going to be able to get out of this alive!

Wait. Wait!

Something was wrong!

Although the three had savage-looking faces, they didn't have the murderous look of predators nearing their targets. Instead, they looked like terrified prey that were filled with horror and despair.

They weren't attacking. They were fleeing for their lives!

Just as Cloudhawk began to have a bad feeling about this, a large group of black creatures suddenly appeared directly behind the fleeing scavengers, charging straight towards them. There had to be at least ten of the things. They were roughly the sizes of wild dogs, and their eyes were a terrifying, rabid red color.

Cloudhawk stood there for a stunned instant, his mind overwhelmed by all of this. Only a single thought was able to make its way past the cacophonous din in his mind, an instinct that came from his very soul…

RUN!

The threat of death was something which brought everyone's full potential.

Somehow, his utterly emaciated body managed to squeeze out another burst of energy. Cloudhawk didn't waste any time trying to figure out exactly what was behind him, nor did he want to. He already knew the only thing that mattered – those mutabeasts, those savage mutabeasts, were utterly terrifying predators.

Within the ruins, and in fact within the entirety of the wastelands, the scavengers were at the very bottom of the food chain. How could they possibly fight back against such terrifying mutabeasts?

The first to fall was a woman. She had been the slowest of the three.

"Save me!"

"Save me!!!"

"SAVE ME!!!"

One of the creatures sank its sharp fangs into her neck, then gave it a vicious tug. Blood spewed out like a geyser, blanketing the area with a crimson hue.

A second monster. A third. The black shapes competed to get at her, and bloody chunks of meat were ripped off of every part of the woman's body. In the blink of an eye, her stomach was torn open and her intestines and internal organs were all dragged out of her.

It was bloody, cruel, and terrifying!

For a brief moment, screams of utter terror and agony could be heard, reaching out like specters of death towards the other three. Some of the mutabeasts were too slow to get a share of the meat, and so they continued to pursue the remaining scavengers. They were simply too fast. Just three seconds later, yet another scavenger was caught by them.

“AHH!”

“NO!”

The sounds of bones splintering and flesh being torn apart… these sounds caused Cloudhawk’s entire body to turn cold!

As the terrified Cloudhawk rounded a corner, a scene that brought him utter despair greeted him. Rubble had completely sealed off the path in front of him. This was a dead end that he could not go past!

What should he do? What should he do?

The third agonized scream rang out as the final scavenger was brought down.

Three of the mutabeasts leapt straight past the final scavenger’s corpse, moving like streaks of black lightning as they sprinted towards the helpless, emaciated youth.

Danger! Danger! Danger! Cloudhawk could sense that death was approaching. If he hesitated for even a moment, he would never be able to recover from it.

Turning back meant death. His only choice was to give this last attempt his all!

Ignoring what was coming for him, he charged straight towards the rubble and dove into a deep but incredibly narrow opening.

There was no way an adult would’ve been able to make it into this opening. Even Cloudhawk’s emaciated form was just barely able to squeeze in… and moments later, he heard a rustling sound as one of the mutabeasts tried to burrow in after him, unwilling to give up the chase!

The mutabeast was so close that Cloudhawk could already smell its foul stench.

Cloudhawk continued to climb through the opening, only to find that he had already

reached the end. There was nowhere else to go at all, and the beast behind him was already growling as it prepared to launch its attack.

Everything hung on a thread. This was the critical moment, the moment when life or death would be decided.

Although he was filled with despair, Cloudhawk didn't hesitate as he turned, metal shard in hand. The dark form was pouncing straight towards him, its blood-red eyes gleaming brutally in the darkness. Its fangs were as sharp as knives, and it was about to plunge them into the morsel of a prey that stood before it, then tear that morsel to shreds.

Cloudhawk let out a low, bestial roar as he stabbed wildly… and his metal shard just so happened to plunge directly into the creature's eyes.

The creature let out an agonized howl as it slammed straight into Cloudhawk. Its sharp claws left several bloody gouges across Cloudhawk's body, but Cloudhawk managed to press its head down. The opening within the rubble really was quite narrow, giving the creature no way to extricate itself from Cloudhawk's grip.

"DIE! DIE!" Cloudhawk had become even more savage than the beast as he used his metal shard to furiously stab more than ten times at the creature's head. An enormous amount of foul-smelling blood filled the surrounding area, coating his face, his hands, and his clothes.

Two of the other beasts were circling the opening, but they weren't able to squeeze in. Upon hearing the miserable howls of the one which had gone in, they immediately turned and left this place. As for Cloudhawk, he was all but immobilized. He panted furiously, his oxygen-deprived brain turning dizzy for a time. Right now, he truly didn't even have enough energy to move so much as a pinky.

After that final frenzied spurt of energy, his body was once more swept up by waves of exhaustion and weakness. He had ignored his body's exhaustion, and it was now demanding that he repay tenfold what he had just squeezed out of it.

For the first time, he was able to get a close look at the creature in front of him.

This was a creature with sleek, oily black fur, long and sharp claws, and terrifyingly red eyes. It almost looked like an enormous mutant rat. Still, that didn't matter. What mattered was that there had to be over five kilograms of meat on the thing.

This was food!

Cloudhawk grew excited once more. He used his metal shard to tear open the creature's tough skin, then carved out a few gibbets of wonderfully fatty meat which he shoved into his mouth. It was sour, pungent, and crude… but to humans who lived here in the wastelands, it was the most delicious of all delicacies.

Cloudhawk normally survived on ants, beetles, and grass. It had been a long, long time since he had eaten meat. As the food slowly made its way down into his stomach, a warm feeling quickly spread throughout his entire body. The aches and pains in his body seemed to lessen, replaced by a sense of satisfaction that was too wonderful to be described in words.

He ate until his wizened stomach was once more burgeoning. Only then did he finally come to a halt, a blissful look on his face.

The mutabeasts outside had long since departed. Cloudhawk dragged the prey he had personally killed with him as he began to return to his burrow. He would be able feast on the five kilograms of meat for many days to come.

But just as Cloudhawk pulled the corpse out of the opening, a voice that was as rough as a wild beast's suddenly rang out. "Put the meat down!"

Four or five adult scavengers were blocking his path. The leader looked quite sturdily built, and his face was filled with savage-looking scars, giving him a baleful, ominous look.

These scavengers had noticed the commotion in this region quite some time ago, and so they had hidden themselves in the surrounding area, hoping to be able to scavenge a few bones from the dead. In the end, they ran into a child carrying the prey he had killed.

The luxurious, fatty meat made their mouths water.

The scar-faced man growled, "Put. The meat. DOWN!"

Cloudhawk looked at them silently, the look on his face akin to that of a lone wolf's, a look filled with danger. The two sides stared at each other across the ruins, like a pair of beasts weighing each other up. In truth, in this era the line between man and beast was a blurry one at best.

Put it down?

I nearly traded my life away to get this meat. You want me to put it down!?

Cloudhawk didn't waste any time on words. Like an enraged young beast, he threw himself straight forwards and landed a punch directly on the scarred man's face.

There was no question as to who would win this battle. In the end, Cloudhawk was nothing more than a half-grown child. How was he supposed to defeat multiple fully-grown adults? In a best-case scenario, the end result would be him suffering multiple beatings, then watch as the meat he had nearly died for be taken away from him.

……

Night finally descended.

Covered in wounds, the youth slunk back to his burrow like a beaten dog. He didn't feel any hatred or resentment towards the scavengers who had stolen his prey. As a child who had grown up in the scavenger camps, he had long ago grown accustomed to the rules of the wastelands.

In the wastelands, there were no such things as 'principles'. The only law was the law of the strong!

The strong would have food, slaves, and women. The weak would be enslaved, abused, and robbed. This was how the wastelands were. In this world, in this age, in this place… morality didn't matter. To be weak was a type of sin, in and of itself!

The light of the moon flowed into his burrow, carrying with it a bone-chilling cold that mere blankets couldn't ward off. He was so cold that he curled up into a ball, but the wounds covering his body made it impossible for him to fall asleep.

Instead, Cloudhawk chose to sit up. He picked up a metal box, blew off the layer of dust covering it, then lifted it up and stared at it as though he was staring at the most valuable of treasures. Slowly, gingerly, he withdrew the brightly-colored objects from within the box.

He stared raptly at these pictures, his gaze distant and dreamy. These were pictures which the old-timer had laboriously collected over the course of many years. They were a testament to the fact that the Old Times truly had existed, but the passage of

countless years had begun to cause the pictures to fade and become unrecognizable.

Every time he stared at them, his young heart couldn't help but quicken its beat.

Every time he stared at them, the pain, the hunger, and the injuries he had suffered would all recede slightly.

Every time he stared at them… no matter how much despair he felt or how dark the world seemed, he would feel as though he could still see a few flickers of light.

The ancient, bygone era of the Old Times! What type of a magical, dream-like world had it been?

Back then, people had been clean and handsome. The cities had been prosperous and flourishing. There was no danger, no terrifying mutabeasts, no brutally savage mutant humans, and no scavengers who struggled to stay alive in the desolate wastelands.

Had that era truly come to an end?

Did it perhaps still survive and persist in some unknown corner of this world?

Cloudhawk's pitch-black eyes were blazing with eagerness. He truly wanted to wander the camps and wander the wastelands!

It was as though a metal seal had long ago been fastened deep within his soul. This was a desire that had sprung up long ago, when he was very young. Back then, the old-timer had asked him: Why? The camps were dangerous, the ruins were dangerous, and the wastelands were even more dangerous. This path was a path of certain death!

"It is because I was born into this world! Since this world chose for me to come into it, I have the right to get a good look at it!

"Sooner or later, I will go out searching. I'll find that utopia, that heaven-like place. If I can so much as catch a glimpse of it, if I can so much as have the chance to press my lips against the ground beneath it… even if I die the very next instant, I will regret nothing!"

The old-timer had fallen silent.

From that day forth, he had kept the child by his side, sharing his food with him and

teaching him how to read. The child had spent many years straddling the line between life and death… but not only had that desire not gone away, it had only grown increasingly intense!

The old-timer had once said that some people were born to be free, much like the hawks. They might grow up in a chicken coop, but sooner or later they would spread their wings and soar into the skies.

Would he truly have that chance?

He wasn't even able to escape the ruins, much less wander into the endless, unfathomably more dangerous wastelands.

The old-timer had often spoken of destiny. Everyone, he claimed, had their own destiny. No one would be able to escape that destiny, no matter how hard they tried.

Is this my destiny? I won't believe it!

The youth had eaten his fill of the torments of the wastelands, but he was still filled with an untamed spirit, and his eyes still shone with an indescribable, irrepressible flame. He slowly placed the metal box underneath his head, using it as his pillow. Only then did his exhausted body finally fall into a deep slumber.

Chapter 2
The Tartarus Mercenaries

The calm silence of dawn was suddenly disrupted by the sound of an engine as a vehicle kicked up storms of sand as it traveled through the wastelands. Someone hit the brakes as soon as the vehicle entered the ruins, causing it to come to a screeching halt. The vehicle's rust-covered metal components creaked and moaned ominously, almost as though the entire thing was at the verge of falling apart. It almost sounded like the labored panting of a crouched beast, and the visible tubing of the vehicle shuddered before a plume of black smoke finally belched out of the tailpipe of the vehicle.

The scavengers had never before seen something like this, a metal monstrosity that could move. Looks of amazement and astonishment were plainly visible on their faces.

This car was built in an almost ridiculously crude manner. Its rusty frame had been cobbled together from seven or eight different types of vehicles, and the damn thing was brimming with spikes, making it look like an ornery metal porcupine. It had four ostentatiously large wheels that ground away at the earth like giant gear wheels, and the car bumpers had been replaced with savagely sharp blades. Clearly, they were not meant for 'protecting' the car, they were meant for ramming opponents. The entire thing looked both deadly and savage, and it seemed just as ferocious and unforgiving as the wastelands themselves.

Six large monstrosities were chasing behind the thing at high speed, galloping forwards on their giant feet. They were split up into two groups of three that had been following the vehicle from both sides.

These creatures looked similar to the ostriches of the Old Times, but their feet were wider and thicker, while their bodies were much firmer and more muscular. Not only could they move across the desert at breakneck speeds, they were able to carry extremely heavy loads of weight. In the wastelands, they were considered one of the most ideal types of mounts.

The six monstrosities had six riders atop them, all dressed in strange outfits. Their haphazardly pieced-together outfits were composed of various bits of metal, wood,

leather, bone, rocks, and other unknown materials. Most likely, they had collected as many things as they could, then fashioned a crude suit of 'armor' from them. As a result, every person had a different 'uniform', and one of them who had only one arm had actually grafted a metal gear onto himself as a prosthetic limb. Another person had grafted a jagged sawtooth blade onto himself. In short, all of them were brimming with the aura of the wastelands.

One of the bigfoot bird riders vaulted off his mount, then respectfully opened the car door and greeted the fat man within.

The fat man was dressed in a sleeveless leather jacket that was dripping with machine oil, and he was protected by a coarse, exoskeleton-like armor that looked like a giant spider which had crawled over him. His hands were covered with leather gloves and were pressed around the wide belt around his waist, close to a pair of black modified pistols. Even these ancient, improvised firearms emanated the coarse savagery of the wastelands. However, they were a direct testament to his strength and his power.

Outlandish outfits, ostentatious appearances, bigfoot birds as mounts, and a savage-looking vehicle.

All of these things loudly proclaimed the status of these men – they were excavators!

"Fuck me, we finally found some scavs." The fat man lit a coarse cigar. Two plumes of smoke came out of his nostrils, then he reached up and flipped open the protective lenses of his sunglasses, revealing a pair of beady eyes that were scanning the raggedly dressed and emaciated scavengers. "Arrrright. Let ole Slyfox have a look at how many of you poor bastards are still alive."

In this chaotic era, fat men were as rare as unicorns! This man in particular was so fat that he had to be nearly 150 kilograms. He looked almost like an exalted king, and in fact he was as proud as any king ever was. When he looked at the scavengers, he didn't seem to be looking at other fellow human beings at all; rather, he was looking at cheap beasts of burden that were waiting to be slaughtered.

The excavators, colloquially known as 'diggers', were considered one of the more important groups within the wastelands. They mainly spent their time burrowing through ancient rubble and retrieving tools and materials from the Old Times. They'd conduct some basic repairs on what they found, then connect them together to form usable weapons and outfits. Eventually, they set up their own organization.

These people often used food and water as a cheap way to convince the lowly scavengers to work for them. The scavengers would scour the ruins for usable materials on their behalf, and so the scavengers were quite familiar with the excavators.

“I’m willing to work!”

“I only need half a strip of carrion each day!”

“I’m stronger than them! Pick me!”

The shabbily-dressed scavengers all clustered around them, fighting for the chance to be seen and chosen by the lord excavator. They pushed and jostled against one another, eventually beginning to fight amongst themselves.

“Silence. SILENCE, you dirty fucking scavs! I’m not here to employ your sorry asses. All of you, shut the fuck up right now!”

The fat man unholstered his pistol, aimed at the skies, then pulled the trigger.

This coarse, heavily modified pistol let out a thunderous bang, stunning and deafening the scavengers. They immediately slunk backwards and shut their mouths, their gazes turned dull and despondent with a hint of fear and cowardice mixed within.

The fat man, ‘Slyfox’, continued to shout at them. “I have credible information that a group of sweepers are active nearby. It is very likely that they might hit this place at any moment. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Looks of utter terror instantly appeared in the numbed eyes of the scavengers.

The sweepers. They were synonymous with terror. The sweepers were a group of mutant bandits who were incredibly bloodthirsty and who delighted in cannibalism. To the sweepers, the scavengers were like sheep for the slaughter. Whenever the sweepers swept through a place, they brought utter, calamitous annihilation to the local scavengers!

“If you end up being captured by the sweepers, you’ll be captured and corralled like pigs. They’ll rip the meat off your bones, then smoke it and store it away for later. They’ll break your bones and make decorations out of them, and the pitiful amount of fat you have will be squeezed out of you and used as fuel for their oil lamps.”

These cruel words were like a cold wind that blew past the scavengers, causing all of them to shudder. This was just how the sweepers were. They swept through everything in their path, sparing nothing and no one.

Slyfox finally announced the reason he had come here today. “Today, I’m going to choose a few dozen strong scavengers to form a squad with us. We’ll be responsible for providing you with weapons to help you fight back against the sweepers!”

The scavengers all retreated by a few steps. Nobody dared to make a sound. The sweepers were legendary for their cruelty and savagery. How would mere scavengers dare to challenge them?

“Useless pieces of crap. You’d rather wait for death than try and make a fight out of it?” When the fat man saw how the scavengers were completely unresponsive, he said in a loud voice, “Who will be the first volunteer? After we beat the sweepers, I’ll take him with me when we leave this place!”

“I’ll go!” A skinny youth with a bloody nose and a bruised face came running over, his face red as he panted from exertion.

It was Cloudhawk!

The wastelands riders who were mounted on the bigfoot birds all began to roar with laughter. A teenage child was clamoring to go and fight the sweepers? When Slyfox saw the child emerge, he glared at him and bellowed, “Can you even lift up our fucking weapons? Just fuck off!”

“I want to go fight the sweepers!” A steely look was in Cloudhawk’s eyes as he said, “If I can survive the fight, you need to fulfill your promise and take me away from this place!”

The fat man had a strange look on his face. “Do you really want to leave that much? Staying alive matters more than anything else!”

Cloudhawk said, “I want to be a digger. I don’t want to be hungry anymore, and I don’t want to be taken advantage of by anyone any longer.”

The wastelands riders all roared with laughter once more. Such juvenile words could only come from the mouths of ignorant children! “Staying alive in a crazy era like this one aint easy. Living with honor and dignity is even harder. D’ya think you’ll never go

hungry again or never be taken advantage of again once you become a digger? What a joke!"

The fat man had been planning on kicking the kid away, but when he saw that look in the kid's pitch-black eyes… for some reason even he couldn't explain, he slapped himself on his own head and said, "Fuck me. Fine. I'll give you one chance. If we wipe out the sweepers and you make it out alive, I'll give you a chance to join us, the Tartarus mercenaries."

"You seriously letting him in?"

"He's just a fucking scav!"

"Shut your fucking mouth. You aren't exactly a fucking noble either! I'm the fucking boss here. What I say goes!" The fat man fired yet another round into the air. "Even a brat like him has the balls to fight. What are the rest of you are afraid of? If you go fight the sweepers, I'll give you each two pieces of bread and a bottle of water. If you don't go, I'll let you have a taste of gunpowder!"

For scavengers, the most irresistible type of temptation was food. In turn, the most terrifying fear was that of death.

This new 'proposal' was far more effective than the previous one. The scavengers began to step forwards, and soon Slyfox was able to fully assemble his suicide squ-… ahem, his lionheart squad!

The fat man called out loudly, "Send this batch over right away. The others can wait here. You there. Kid. Get in the car with me!"

Cloudhawk was dragged into the front passenger seat. The engine revved to life with a bestial howl before he even had a chance to find his footing, and the momentum caused him to be pressed firmly against the seat.

This ramshackle vehicle was cobbled together from seven or eight different vehicles and seemed ready to fall apart at a moment's notice, but once it started to move it moved at incredible speeds, instantly zipping off into the distance.

The real problem was that the damn thing didn't have any seatbelts. The scavengers had no choice but to desperately cling on for dear life in order to not be sent flying.

The six wastelands riders each brought a scavenger along with them. The bigfoot birds twisted their necks, then immediately began to gallop across the sands with their giant feet. As for the porcupine-like vehicle, it was now packed to the brim with scavengers. It clambered up and down the sand dunes, dangerously veering right and left as it just barely avoided the obstacles in its path. It was an exciting but incredibly bumpy ride, and it felt as though they were a small boat being tossed about in a storm at sea.

Cloudhawk felt both nervous and excited. His entire body was trembling, whether it be due to the terrifying prospect of facing the savage sweepers or the chance of seeing the vast world outside the scavenger camp. Every single cell in his body was screaming in excitement.

One thought in particular dominated his mind.

Old-timer, are you seeing this? I just made it out of the camp!

Shortly after the car charged out of the ruins, a group of wanderers could be seen moving through the sands up ahead. Not only did the fat man not move to avoid them, he actually accelerated straight towards them.

“Careful!” Cloudhawk cried out in shock, “There are people there!”

The monstrous vehicle barreled straight through, sending the first person flying while slicing his chest open. A large amount of blood splattered inside the vehicle like a crimson rain, sprinkling across Slyfox’s clothes as well as Cloudhawk’s face. A few pieces of mangled human flesh and gore covered the vehicle.

“Bahahahahaha!”

The fat man let out a few crazed laughs, then turned on the automatic windshield wiper, letting the wiper sweep away the chunks of flesh and blood on the glass windshield. He then turned the vehicle, using it to crush yet another one of the nomads. Cloudhawk could hear, sense, and even *feel* the wheels of the car crush the man’s body apart and splinter his very bones.

A look of savage, wild glee was on the fat man’s face. He took another puff of his cigar, then chased down a third person. This one was knocked flying and smashed to death!

“Awesome. Absolutely fucking awesome.” The mounted wastelands riders used their bigfoot birds to chase after the survivors, cutting down the defenseless wanderers like

wheat. One of the riders sank his hook into the jaw of one of the wastelands nomads, then dragged the barbarian behind him like a piece of garbage, leaving behind a smear of blood and gore on the ground.

Cloudhawk's entire body was as cold as ice, and he couldn't stop the shivering. A look of confusion and rage was on his young face as he glared at the fat man. "W-why… why are you doing this?!"

Scavengers also killed others, but that was only when they were starving. It was an act of madness that they only carried out for the sake of survival! These excavators didn't lack for food. They were doing this for nothing more than pure amusement. Cloudhawk simply couldn't understand why they were acting like this!

"Hah! None of your fucking business." The fat man spat loudly. "And you don't know shit. These are roamers! Killing them is doing a service to the wastelands."

The four main 'organizations' in the wastelands were the scavengers (scavs), the excavators (diggers), the nomads (roamers), and the sweepers.

Scavengers were at the bottom of the totem pole. Once a group of scavengers learned how to operate excavating machinery to search for weapons in the ruins or learned how to master other tools or trades, they would have a chance to set up their own society and become excavators themselves.

Scavengers often drank highly contaminated water and ate mutated food. This sort of inhospitable environment caused many of them to slowly mutate, and the mutation was in both body and mind. The vast majority of these mutants would become as savage and cruel as animals, and they would leave the society of scavengers and become nomad wanderers who would roam the lands and prey upon whoever they found.

Once enough nomads gathered together in one place, they would eventually become groups of sweepers who swept through entire regions of the wastelands. Whenever they passed through a region, the local scavengers and excavators alike would be risk of utter annihilation.

How many scavenger, excavator, nomad, and sweeper organizations existed in the wastelands?

Far too many.

This ancient city alone was filled with many different scavenger camps, as well as countless excavators and sweepers.

In the end, the twenty-plus scavengers were sent to the temporary excavator base.

This was a strangely shaped building that was planted into the ground like an inverted pyramid. This building was quite enormous, and although it had clearly seen far better times, it was still quite obvious that in both pattern and style it was something the likes of which had never before appeared in any period of human history. This was something that had suddenly appeared upon this vast earth.

A jerry-rigged truck was parked in the shadow of the inverted pyramid. It had a total of five wheels, with the sole frontal wheel being the smallest wheel. The two wheels in the middle were larger, while the two wheels in the back were almost half the size of a man. The truck itself was large and highly functional, with its sides covered by random steel chains and wire circles. It looked like a giant ugly lizard, but it seemed capable of bearing many things.

The fat man leapt out of his vehicle and hollered, “Mad Dog, hurry up and come say hello to the fresh meat!”

The man nicknamed ‘Mad Dog’ was the fellow standing next to the truck. He was an awesomely muscled black man who was 1.9 meters tall, and his bald head and face were both covered with all sorts of scars, large and small. One of the scars looked as though it had been left by someone who had chopped his head in half, only for another person to somehow use a large number of needles and thread to stitch the pieces back together.

Savage, ferocious, hideous. These three words were invented to describe him!

Mad Dog was a man of some status, but his equipment looked quite simple and crude. He didn’t have any firearms of his own. All he had was a pair of daggers that were tucked into sheaths around his waist. He was dressed in a set of leather armor that bristled with spikes which mostly served to protect his chest and abdomen. His muscular arms and his shoulders were completely bare, and they looked as chiseled as slabs of black marble.

The black man coldly swept the scavengers with his gaze. Not saying a word, he turned and pulled open the chains to the truck, revealing the many items it held within it.

“Choose for yourselves!”

The scavengers stared at the large pile of miscellaneous weapons in front of them. There were spears, machetes, hammers, axes… although these were all rather clumsily-made ‘cold weapons’, for scavengers they were still incredibly rare and valuable.

“Pick a weapon that suits your hand. Whether or not you’ll be able to survive will be up to them.” The fat man said to Mad Dog, “Let them enjoy a last supper. They probably aren’t gonna have another chance like this again!”

The fat man clearly didn’t give a shit about the feelings of his recruited scavengers, and so he said these words openly and loudly.

Looks of terror appeared in the eyes of the scavengers. They had no idea what sort of cruelty and savagery they were in for.

They had no choice but to begin to choose their own weapons. Machetes and axes carried a lot of power, but Cloudhawk wasn’t strong enough to use them. In the end, he chose a shortsword that was less than three feet long. When Cloudhawk felt the cold metal of the sword cool his hands, he couldn’t help but feel slightly more at ease.

No matter what happened, he would accept it. Even if his chances of surviving were slim, he would still try his best to stay alive. Cloudhawk refused to be a lowly scavenger for the rest of his life. He didn’t want to die alone and forgotten like the old-timer had.

Chapter 3
Mad Dog

A faint, cloying smell emanated from the wax paper, assaulting his nostrils with its fragrance. It was an intoxicating feeling that would make a man feel as though he was dreaming.

Two pieces of tough black bread, and a bottle of lightly contaminated water. The scavengers had never even seen such high-quality food before, and every single scavenger was lost in a state of incredible bliss.

Cloudhawk's hands were shaking as he slowly unwrapped the waxy paper, looking almost like a devout pilgrim who was opening up a sacred object. Just like that, the two pieces of hard bread appeared before his eyes. Their fragrance grew even stronger than before, causing his mouth to almost immediately water. Bread. This was bread!

He had seen pictures of this before in books. He never would've imagined that such a legendary delicacy would appear in his very own hands. In the ruins, these two pieces of bread would be worth a man's life. No. They would be worth the lives of ten men!

Cloudhawk carefully, gingerly broke off a small piece of bread, then put it into his mouth. He closed his eyes, carefully savoring the taste. He first allowed his saliva to slowly soften the tough bread, allowing its unique flavors to spread across the tip of his tongue. This felt so wonderful that it seemed almost unreal, and he felt completely intoxicated. It was as though this was all a dream.

However, this wonderful dream was rudely and abruptly interrupted.

A skinny but muscular figure was walking towards him, machete in hand. The man's face was covered with a hideous knife scar. Who was this? It was the man who had led the others in stealing Cloudhawk's meat just yesterday.

He had come to take part in this activity as well!

Cloudhawk picked up his shortsword, glaring at the scar-faced man with undisguised hostility in his eyes. He looked almost like an enraged young leopard. Yesterday, he

had already eaten his fill and so there was no need for him to fight to the death. Today, things were different. If anyone dared to try and take his bread away from him, he'd plunge his shortsword through that person's heart, even if it meant dying with him!

"I'm not interested in your food!"

"Then what do you want?"

The scar-faced man had a strange look in his eyes, which flickered with a chilling look. "See that over there? There are only three diggers, but that truck is filled with bread and water. All of us are armed. Why don't we give it a shot?"

There were only three excavators guarding the truck, and none of the three were armed with firearms. It was highly likely that the excavators had brought them here to send them to their deaths. Rather than sit here and wait to die, why not join forces and kill the three instead? Food, weapons, water… these were the most important things the wastelands had to offer, and they would be able to obtain all three in one go!

When the scavengers thought back to how utterly delicious the bread had been, their eyes couldn't help but turn bloodshot. A communal greed and desire to kill began to quickly rise within their breasts.

Kill them all! Chop them into mincemeat!

The scavengers all began to rise to their feet. The scar-faced man glared at the irresolute Cloudhawk. "You comin' or not?"

All men had desires, and the desire for food and for life were amongst the most powerful desires there were. In fact, Cloudhawk wanted to join them, but… the experiences he had gone through while living in the ruins for so many years had made it impossible for him to trust the scar-faced man and the others. An underage, undersized youth… even if they did manage to seize all the bread and water, would the scar-faced man and the others really share it with him?

The answer was quite obvious.

There was no way the scar-faced man would give him so much as a single roll of bread. Instead, all the scavengers would join together to wipe out the weaklings of their group… because with each person they killed, each survivor would gain a

correspondingly greater amount of resources.

And… would the scavengers even be able to succeed?

This seemed like an idiotic question. Twenty against three? The answer was obvious. But, for some reason, Cloudhawk had a very bad feeling about what was going to happen!

Cloudhawk snuck a glance at the black man. When he did, he couldn't help but feel his scalp grow numb. It was as though a bucket of icewater had just been poured over his head.

The savage-looking black man was actually looking straight at the scavengers, as though he could hear what they were saying.

Their gazes met in midair.

Cloudhawk felt as though he had been struck by a thunderbolt. The pitifully limited vocabulary he possessed wasn't even close to being enough to describe the feeling those eyes had given him!

That sharp, fierce glare contained an indescribable, awesome power within them. It didn't feel like the gaze of a man; rather, it felt like the gaze of a terrifying mutabeast. There was a naked warning in that gaze: *All of you are nothing more than a group of pitifully weak prey. You aren't even worth worrying about!*

Cloudhawk could sense every muscle in his body turning taut with fear. It was as though he was a juvenile animal who had just been paralyzed with terror. Although he knew he had no chance of surviving, his subconscious desire was to fight back!

"Don't go." Cloudhawk summoned every scrap of courage and strength he had to finally break their shared gaze, only to find that he had drenched himself in icy sweat. He whispered, "You are all gonna die!"

"You useless piece of crap!" The scar-faced man spat hard, then said to the other scavengers, "Let's kill those diggers, then come back and deal with this piece of trash."

"Alright!"

The twenty-plus excavators began to move in unison, their eyes filled with silent

grimness. Everyone who lived within the wastelands knew exactly what that grim look signified. The scavengers had transformed into a pack of wolves… or, to be precise, they had become a pack of hungry wolves stalking their prey.

Mad Dog was neither nervous nor impatient. He just continued to puff on his cigarette as though the pack of hungry human wolves in front of him didn't even exist.

He did give a glance to the skinny youth who was silently squatting next to the wall, chewing on a piece of bread. That particular scav was a bit interesting. He was quite clever and sharp. The kid's gaze had been almost bestial, filled with a certain stubborn wildness. He had actually managed to trade stares with Mad Dog for quite some time without breaking down.

Most importantly of all, the kid had a good nose for danger. Was that the reason why he had elected not to join the others in their suicidal actions? What an interesting kid!

"Whaddya doing?! You lookin' to die?!"

"You overestimate yourselves, you cockroaches. All of you need to back the fuck up!"

By now, the other two mercenaries also noticed that the scavengers were beginning to move. They pulled out their weapons, menacing looks on their faces as they cursed angrily. The scavengers, however, didn't respond to them at all as they continued to draw closer and closer.

"Eheheh. C'mon, guys. Why you gotta be like this?" Mad Dog let out a deep, hoarse chuckle that sounded like the hooting of an owl. When he smiled, the hideous scars across his face began to twist and turn like so many ugly centipedes. He casually tossed his cigarette to the ground, then used the tip of his boot to grind it into the mud. "Y'know, I was feeling pretty bored. Step aside, rookies."

"Mad Dog, boss, don't…"

The two mercenaries exchanged a glance with Mad Dog, then immediately shut their mouths. They silently stepped aside, looks of sympathy on their faces as they glanced at the foolish scavengers.

Mad Dog began to grin savagely as he slowly pulled out his two gleaming machetes. The machetes were shaped somewhat like kukris, except the 'backs' of the machetes were flat while the blades were curved. The blades were extremely wide and very top-

heavy and would require tremendous wrist strength to use properly. The shocking thing was, after Mad Dog pulled them out he then casually tossed them to the ground, balling up his fists as he walked towards the scavengers.

Why did he throw his weapons away?

Why was he able to face more than twenty men without looking the slightest bit nervous?

Why was he walking straight towards a large group of armed scavengers by himself?

The scavengers had lost all rationality by now. They had bloodthirsty looks on their faces, and they were brimming with the desire to do murder. None of what Mad Dog was doing made any sense, but all such considerations had long ago fled their minds. The scar-faced man let out a loud roar: “Kill!” And just like that, the dozens of scavengers charged forwards like a pack of starving mongrels.

The scar-faced man lifted his machete up high, charging at the forefront of his pack. On his right was a scavenger who wielded a metal rod, while to his left was a scavenger who held an axe. These were the three strongest and most agile scavengers in this group, which was why they led the vanguard in this charge!

Split their heads open! Chop their arms off! Take everything which belonged to them!

This was what the scar-faced man was thinking, and that was exactly what he was going to do. Except… as soon as he lifted his machete up, his movements came to a sudden halt.

Mad Dog reached out lightning-fast with his right hand, his five fingers closing over his opponent’s wrist. Crack! The wrist was twisted in the opposite direction, twisted so hard that the bones could be seen poking out of the skin as blood poured out from the puncture wounds.

Next, Mad Dog followed up with a sweeping kick from his right leg. This kick landed upon the scar-faced man’s legs with the power of a steel whip, and the scar-faced man was suddenly ‘shortened’ as his legs suddenly bent to a terrifyingly unnatural degree. The bones within his legs had been cleanly snapped apart in multiple places.

Finally, there came a punch!

The scar-faced man's chest was completely caved in by this punch. Eight of his ribs were shattered into tiny pieces, and he was sent flying backwards like a sandbag, instantly knocking flat several of the scavengers who were behind him.

Right at this moment, the metal rod came slamming down towards Mad Dog.

Mad Dog made it look as easy as picking flowers; a grab, a pull, a toss. He first grabbed the metal rod, pulled it away from the man with force, and then sent it back to him in a furious blow by slamming the rod straight through the man's mouth. This forceful entry first shattered the man's teeth into tiny bits, and then… crunch. A clear sound rang out as the metal rod exited through the back of the man's skull. An enormous hole had appeared in his head!

"Ahhhhh! Monster!"

The axe-wielding scavenger was so terrified by this sight that he immediately turned tail and started to flee.

But Mad Dog wasn't going to let him off. He leaped into the air, bounding nearly two meters high as he lifted his right leg past the man's head, then used it to deliver a crushing downwards blow towards the man's skull.

CRUNCH.

The cervical vertebrae was cleanly severed!

As for the head itself, it was actually caved into the man's chest by the terrifying force of Mad Dog's strike. The inconceivable power of this strike actually drilled the scavenger's legs into the ground, almost like a nail being hammered into the earth. He stood there, unable to fall down… and of course, he was deader than dead!

"Ahahah!" Mad Dog's savage face was filled with berserk delight and a look of absolute intoxication. It was as though he had already lost complete control of his mind. "C'mon, keep it up! I haven't had enough fun yet!"

The two mercenaries groaned mentally when they saw this. The boss had entered one of his berserk states, which was incredibly dangerous. This was the reason why his nickname was 'Mad Dog'!

Neither of the two rookie mercenaries dared to move too close to him!

The scar-faced man lay there on the ground, somehow still alive and struggling to draw breath. Mad Dog stepped directly onto his face, completely caving it in and causing the white brain matter to explode forth from his face, almost as though it was sick of being in the man's skull and impatient to move somewhere else. Mad Dog had crushed the man's skull as easily as if he was stepping on a chicken egg.

This entire process had taken less than five seconds. Mad Dog, using utterly brutal and bloody methods, had instantly defeated and slain the three strongest scavengers. His attacks were so clean and measured that he had clearly perfected them over countless 'practice' sessions. His power was simply inhuman, and it was utterly bone-chilling!

He was no man. He was an absolute devil!

The scavengers were all terrified out of their wits, with the more cowardly ones peeing themselves on the spot. Cloudhawk stared wide-eyed at all of this. If he hadn't seen it all happen in person, there's no way he would've believed that any man could be as strong as this!

Mad Dog charged forwards towards the other scavengers, grabbing the machete out of the scar-faced man's lifeless hands. Just as he was about to begin massacring the rest…

Boom! A rumbling sound could be heard as the porcupine-shaped vehicle came flying through the sand-swept air, having flown off the edge of one of the sand dunes just outside.

The fat man, cigar in mouth, was seated within the shaking vehicle. His left hand was controlling the steering wheel while his right hand was pulling his gun out of its holster. Both the vehicle and the fat man himself were in midair as the fat man acted. He drew his gun, then shot at Mad Dog without even aiming at all.

A bullet tore through the air, moving dozens of meters in a split second.

Clang!

The machete in Mad Dog's hands was struck head-on and shattered into two pieces.

Cloudhawk was stunned once again. The fat man didn't seem to possess any skills at all, but he actually was a terrifyingly skilled marksman. His inconceivable accuracy was just as inhuman as Mad Dog's strength had been!

The vehicle sped straight into their temporary base.

“Mad Dog, what the actual fuck are you doing?” The fat man stared at the three obliterated corpses on the ground. “Messing around and killing one or two of them is one thing, but are you planning to wipe out all of these fuckers?”

“I lost control for a second.” Mad Dog shook his head hard, seemingly back in control of himself again. “They are still alive, right? No big deal.”

The fat man knew of Mad Dog’s problem. Whenever the guy killed someone, he often entered a berserk state. Thank goodness he had managed to come back just in the nick of time.

“Slyfox, what’s the point of you even bringing these pieces of crap with you?” Mad Dog was now extremely irritable and impatient. “Way I see it, all you are doing is wasting our time!”

“How are you supposed to catch any fish without bait? Alright, stop yapping.” The fat man patted Mad Dog on his shoulders. “Our employers for this mission are quite extraordinary, and the mission rewards are quite incredible!”

Mad Dog said nothing further.

The fat man turned to glance at the remaining scavengers. “Enough. Now that all of us are here… listen up, you dirty scavs! I’ll give you half an hour to prepare!”

“I’m not going anywhere!” A terrified-looking scavenger suddenly cried out.

This was different from the jobs which the excavators usually had the scavengers do. These excavators were all freaks. If they followed these excavators, all of them would definitely die.

Bang!

No one even saw the fat man pull the trigger.

The fat man had personally modified his gun, and the bullets were custom-manufactured as well. The enormous power of the slug actually caused the protesting scavenger’s head to completely blow apart. Moments later, the protestor slumped to the ground, white brain matter oozing out from his shattered skull onto the ground.

His entire body was twitching involuntarily.

The other scavengers all felt a chill go through their spines.

As for Cloudhawk, he continued to sit there next to the wall, watching as he slowly popped the final piece of bread into his mouth. He then finished off his final mouthful of water.

The old-timer's words echoed in his mind. *A man can become either a chess player or a chess piece. Chess players could choose how they wish to play. Chess pieces cannot.*

Every single person had the chance to become a chess player, but they had to be incredibly careful with each choice they made. Once they became chess pieces, their lives would no longer be under their own control. Anger, terror, resignation… none of it would matter. Once you became a chess piece, if you overestimated yourself and still thought yourself to be a player who had the power to choose his own fate, the result would be that you would end up like the scar-faced man and the others.

This was why Cloudhawk had already made up his mind on what he was going to do. He was going to be a good little chess piece… and wait for the right moment to jump off this board and become a player once more.

Chapter 4
The Sweepers

Nightfall. Night signified the cold. It also signified death.

An enormous rat was skittering through the ruins, its pitch-black form merging into the darkness of the night as its beady little crimson eyes swept left and right. The area around it was rife with ditches of water. The water was a deep green color and thick with the aura of rot and contamination. The corpses of many unknown animals had long been steeped within that foul water.

There was some type of algae-like growth which could be seen in spots throughout this area, emanating their dim, sickly fluorescent light. The light wasn't enough to illuminate anything; all it could do was make the dark night seem even more sinister and forboding.

The giant rat vigilantly scanned its surroundings. Finally, it came to a halt in front of a giant tunnel. This was perhaps a transportation hub of the Old Times, or possibly an entranceway to an ancient, enormous building. It was also possible that it was a building from one of the invading worlds… but by now, none of this mattered.

The giant rat hesitated, unsure of whether or not it would go in. It could smell a strange, dangerous scent.

Right at this moment, a large amount of torch light could be seen, followed by the sounds of many people moving together.

The giant rat was so startled it instantly dove into that tunnel. A few seconds later, it emanated a chilling screech from deep within the tunnel. The giant rat's screeching sound continuously receded, almost as if it was being dragged deeper and deeper into the tunnel. Finally, the giant rat's miserable screeches were cut short, followed by ripping, gnashing, and chewing sounds.

A few minutes later, the light from a torch shone over this place.

Mad Dog stared at the enormous ruins before him, a frown on his face. "You sure this

is it?"

The fat man pulled a match, using it to light the cigarette in his mouth. "The layout here is extremely complicated. Supposedly, those bastards are pretty sly. It'll be dangerous if we try to force our way in, and we'll also set off the alarms. It'll be hard for us to wipe'm all out."

Mad Dog frowned even more. "Then what should we do?"

"Why do you think I brought so many pawns?" The fat man stared at Mad Dog as though his question was offensively stupid, then tossed his half-smoked cigarette to the ground. "Rookies, send in the bait!"

Several of the mercenaries walked over to the quivering scavengers. "Y'all deaf? Slyfox told you to move it!"

The scavengers were both cold and frightened. The yawning black tunnel before them seemed to be the entrance into Hell itself. By now, even the most foolish of them could tell that they were just here to serve as bait, bait to lure some people out. That was it!

But… did the scavengers have the choice to refuse? Only if they could move faster than a speeding bullet. Otherwise, none of them would be able to escape Slyfox's pistol!

The scavengers had no choice but to be driven into the tunnel, raising their torches high as they slowly shuffled forwards.

"Be careful in there, rookies." The fat man lit another cigarette, puffing slowly in a relaxed manner as he watched the torches advance through the tunnel. "Take things slow. Let the pawns stay up ahead of you."

The tunnel was both cold and moist. It was filled with a strong stench of rot and decay, and it held many ancient algae-covered tools that lay abandoned. Many mosquitoes could be heard buzzing throughout the tunnel, and it was filled with the signs of dangerous creatures living within it.

Cloudhawk was terrified out of his senses, but also quite puzzled. For some reason, he could vaguely sense that something was calling towards him from an unfathomably deep part of this dark tunnel. He had never sensed anything like this before. The feeling was both subtle and indescribably peculiar.

What secrets were hidden within this place? And what were those powerful excavators planning on doing?

Ancient items from the Old Times weren't the only things that littered the tunnels. The scavengers were also able to see many suspicious traces, such as tattered bits of cloth, animal carcasses, and congealed pools of blood. But the layout here was quite complicated; after walking for twenty or thirty minutes, no one was able to tell which direction was which.

Kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk.

A shrill sound rang out from some unknown place, sounding almost like nails scratching across a blackboard. The sound was ear-piercingly sharp, and it rang out continuously, sometimes loud and sometimes soft. There was no way to tell where it was coming from.

Darkness was something capable of bringing out the most primordial of fears, and the fear of the unknown can multiply all other fears a hundredfold!

The scavengers halted their advance, their bodies stiff with fear and their foreheads covered with sweat. They didn't know if they were to advance or to retreat. The darkness around them was filled with rustling sounds, causing their nerves to fray even more. In fact, they were almost at the breaking point already.

"AHHH!!" A scavenger suddenly let out a horrifying, blood-curling scream. Only then did the others turn and see something which they would never be able to forget. At some point in time, the area around them had become filled with bugs. The vast majority of the bugs looked like beetles, but there were also long, centipede-like creatures that were hanging from the walls, crawling on the ground, and even crawling up their bodies. The entire area was filled with the things.

Cloudhawk frantically began to brush away at his clothes, his leg, his stomach, and his back. He had no idea when so many bugs had begun to crawl all over his body. He hadn't felt them biting at him at all, and some of them had already begun to burrow their way into his flesh. He frantically clutched at his torch, pushing the blazing flames against his own body. It was better to suffer heavy burns than to let these bugs eat their way into his body and kill him!

Bugs! There were bugs everywhere! They were clustered so tightly and were so

numerous, it was like an entire wave of bugs was before them!

Even the boldest of men would be scared senseless upon seeing such a sight. By the time the scavengers at the outside perimeter noticed the bugs, it was already far too late. By the time they tore their clothes open, they found that their bodies had already been transformed into unrecognizable masses of blood and flesh, with many bulging lumps roaming about underneath their skin.

“NO!”

“AHHH!”

Several scavengers let out horrified screams as they collapsed to the ground, and the surrounding bugs all immediately swarmed towards them. They burrowed in through every available orifice, and if they couldn’t find any they would make their own using their teeth.

“RUN!” The scavengers were already at the point of completely breaking down. When this word rang out, it was like a spark going off in a room full of gunpowder, setting all of their fears alight. The blazing fear burnt away all their rationality and intellect, causing all of them to scream in horror as they began to flee in every direction.

A few managed to escape the bug-infested region. Before any of them had the chance to so much as relax, the ones at the front stumbled into some sort of trap.

Whoosh! A large bucket of powerful green acid was overturned above them, causing the acid to be poured over their faces and bodies. The powerful, corrosive acid instantly began to eat away at them, causing large clumps of acid-eaten flesh and hair to fall off their bodies as bloody blisters began to appear on their faces and their hands.

“AHHHHHHHH!” A scavenger let out a horrified scream, then turned and ran straight towards Cloudhawk. Right now, he looked just like a demon himself. He was clawing at his acid-eaten head out of blind instinct, with the result being that he himself scraped large chunks of flesh off his face, revealing a bloody skull. The flesh on his fingers had also withered away, leaving only the bones… but oblivious to all of this, he continued to just scream like a madman.

Cloudhawk stared at this horrifying, breathtaking sight. He was stunned and unable to give voice to his astonishment, and his fear was being overridden by an even more terrifying thought – these were all carefully prepared traps, traps laid out by sentient,

intelligent beings!

A sharp spear suddenly stabbed through the darkness. The scavenger's chest was pierced through as easily as paper, and the terrifying strength behind the spear caused both it and the scavenger to be nailed firmly to the wall.

A steel hook shot out as well, reaching out towards one of the fleeing scavengers and ripping off half of the flesh from his stomach. The scavenger didn't seem to notice a thing, continuing to scream madly as he fled as fast as he could. His blood and intestines gushed out for quite a few meters before he finally fell down to the ground, all traces of life having fled him.

This was a slaughter. This was butchery!

"Don't be afraid. It's all a trap. If we just…"

The scavenger didn't even have a chance to finish his words before a long knife came chopping towards him through the darkness. The knife wasn't that sharp, but its wielder was so terrifyingly strong that the knife sliced all the way through the scavenger, from the right shoulder blade through to the lower flank. The man was ripped in half, and the blood from his bisected body instantly sprayed across the faces of those around him.

His organs flopped out to the ground, and they were still pulsing.

The scavenger didn't die right away, but all of his 'courage' disappeared. All he could do was let out an absolutely inhuman scream, filled with such despair and horror that it was like a mountain hammering away at the spirits of the survivors.

Is that them? Have they finally come out? Cloudhawk saw strange creatures in front of him, the likes of which he had never seen before. The creatures were completely nude and unclothed, but their bodies were completely covered with cancerous growths that looked like the knots on a tree or tree roots. From head to foot, they were covered with those gnarly, wart-like growths.

They also had large growths atop their heads which looked much like the most malignant of malignant tumors. They had two legs that looked almost like a rat's legs, with knees that inverted backwards instead of forwards. This gave the creatures superior running abilities and leaping abilities. As for weapons, they primarily wielded long knives, spears, and stone hammers.

There was at least one thing which the excavators had told the truth about – there really were sweepers here!

In this day and age, human mutants could be seen everywhere. However, those mutations were generally uncontrollable, which meant that every single mutant looked different from the others. These sweepers, however, didn't just look the same, they also kept a modicum of intelligence. They definitely were an incredibly rare breed of mutants.

One of the scavengers, gripped by despair, let out a desperate counter-attack. Slash! Alas, the scavenger's knife couldn't even cut through his opponent's skin, coming to a halt before those gnarly, root-like lumps of flesh. The sweeper, however, struck out with the heavy stone hammer in his hands, delivering a vicious blow to the scavenger's chest. The furious power of the blow pulverized the scavenger's flesh and bones, instantly reducing him to a flattened chunk of meat dressed in tattered human clothes.

No way. Fighting head-on meant death. These creatures were far stronger than any humans! Even worse, the sweepers were beginning to increase in number. Their stone warhammers were like terrifying weapons of mass destruction, and each blow from a warhammer reduced one of the scavengers into a bag of pulverized meat!

The scavengers had completely broken down. No matter where they ran, they would die. Faced with certain death, they all began to flee wildly, but they also knew that in the end they would end up as flattened hunks of flesh. The endless horror of it all, coupled with unrelenting despair, nibbled away at their minds and their sanity. The little bit of strength and sanity they had left was only enough for them to cry and howl in misery.

Something like this… if you never experienced them yourself, you would never be able to truly imagine what those howls sounded like.

Anguished howls, intermixed with the sounds of bones being crunched and shattered. It formed a strange, almost musical cadence that echoed throughout the tunnels, a song that was composed from the devil himself, a song that no one who heard it would ever be able to forget.

One warm body after another was broken down and destroyed. One life after another was callously snuffed out!

Prior to this, Cloudhawk had never truly understood the concept of what 'Hell' meant. In this instant, all of his courage and his heroic aspirations vanished as he heard those hideous screams. The only thing he left was a gamblers desire to try the cards one final time as he followed the few surviving scavengers as they charged towards a passageway with fairly few sweepers.

Crunch! The sound of yet another body being physically blown apart could be heard!

One of the comrades who had been by his side just moments ago was suddenly felled by the hammer of a pursuing sweeper. Multiple sweepers immediately swarmed forwards, surrounding the fallen figure and smashing down with their heavy stone warhammers. The corpse was reduced to a state where it was in even worse shape than the refuse on the ground!

The sight of blood spraying everywhere provided an incredible shot of adrenaline to Cloudhawk. He felt as though all of his energy had been focused into his legs, and only a single thought was in his mind – Get the hell out of here!

"AHH!" Right at this moment, one of the scavengers who was running in front of him let out a miserable scream as he fell to the ground, the pincers of some strange beast having clamped around his feet. This beast's pincers appeared to contain a tremendous amount of force, as its clamping attack had crushed almost every bone in the scavenger's feet so badly that shattered bits of bone could be seen poking out of his skin!

"Help me!"

"I'm begging you, save me!"

Cloudhawk fled past him without even thinking about stopping, but the scavenger actually managed to grab him by the feet. Caught off-balance, Cloudhawk fell to the ground as well.

The scavenger's face was covered with tears and snot. "Help me!"

Cloudhawk howled back, "I can't save you! Let me go!"

"Then give me a clean death!" The scavenger's face was filled with despair. "If those devils get their hands on me… I'd rather die now!"

Cloudhawk hesitated. He had never killed anyone before! But right at this moment, he could see a dark figure beginning to move straight towards them.

"Give me a clean death!" The scavenger lay there on the ground, howling with all his might, "I'M BEGGING YOU!"

Cloudhawk let out a guttural, bestial roar, then raised his short sword up high before plunging it the man's neck. Blood immediately spurted out, and the stench of the blood assaulted his nostrils. Cloudhawk wiped his face, not bothering to pull out his blood-stained short sword. He kicked his right leg free from the man's grip, then clambered to his feet and continued to furiously run towards the depths of the tunnels!

This was his first time killing another human being!

He couldn't forget the look of utter despair on the dying scavenger's face. It seemed to have indelibly impressed itself into his heart, into his very soul.

Cloudhawk's eyes were bloodshot with shock and horror. He felt as though a volcano was rumbling deep within his soul, making him want to scream with rage and anguish. However, this wasn't the right time. The underground tunnels stretched out like the webs of a spider, and he had no idea how many dangerous creatures were living here.

The dark figure behind him tossed down its stone hammer, smeared with red blood and white brain matter, then reached backwards to pull a javelin from its back. It threw the spear directly towards Cloudhawk!

The javelin howled through the air. Sensing the impending danger, Cloudhawk almost instinctively leaned sideways, letting the sharp tip of the spear scrape right past his face. It was so close that it had actually severed a few strands of his hair!

The sweeper was rather surprised. It never would've expected for a young human to possess such an acute sense for danger!

Cloudhawk knew that the specter of death had just brushed past him. He continued to furiously run forwards at full speed. Upon noticing that there was a turn in the tunnel right up ahead, he immediately dashed in without hesitating at all. Here there was a branch in the tunnels, with three different openings leading towards three different directions. Cloudhawk chose one at random, then charged into it and hid himself towards the back of the tunnel.

There was a limit to how much strength he had, and he was already at the verge of collapsing. If he continue to flee, he would definitely be caught by the sweeper. His only chance was to entrust everything to luck and hope that the sweeper wouldn't choose the tunnel he had entered.

The dark figure came to a halt in front of the three tunnels. It hesitated there for a few seconds, not making an immediate decision. This sweeper was an experienced hunter. The sweeper could sense that the footsteps had come to a halt, which meant that the human hadn't run far. He had to be still hiding nearby, and so the sweeper didn't run blindly into one of the tunnels. Instead, the sweeper intended to rely on his acute hearing to determine where the human was.

Right now, Cloudhawk was hidden less than ten meters away from the sweeper. His heart was hammering so hard, he felt as though it was about to burst out from his chest.

This time, he was completely finished. The sweeper wasn't going to leave. He was waiting, waiting for Cloudhawk to show himself. If Cloudhawk made the slightest of sounds, he would probably be immediately discovered and caught.

What was he supposed to do? Cloudhawk clenched his fists, his palms full of sweat. But right at this moment, another powerful premonition of danger filled his mind. Cloudhawk could feel something coming, and he immediately turned to stare towards his left. His eyes narrowed from what he saw.

The walls of the tunnels here were lit by the fluorescent moss… and all of a sudden, without making any sound at all, an incredibly large black silhouette had suddenly appeared on them. This creature had eight slender legs, and its joints were all covered with needle-like strands of bristles that were as sharp as knives. It had twelve blood-red eyes, each of which gleamed with a brutal, savage light.

This was a mutabeasts! An enormous mutabeast spider, one which was at least two meters long!

The dangerous creature lay atop the ceilings. Clearly, it had already discovered Cloudhawk and was slowly crawling closer and closer towards him.

Right at this moment, the sweeper heard something as well. The sweeper pulled out yet another javelin from behind its back, then began to stride towards Cloudhawk's

direction.

Cloudhawk's forehead was matted with sweat, and he found it impossible to tamp down his fear.

Time to try something crazy! He shut his eyes, then howled as he jumped out of his hiding spot!

Upon seeing that its prey was trying to flee, the enormous spider flexed its eight legs, then shot out at the same time as its prey jumped out. The spider was a powerful predator that moved far faster than Cloudhawk did; it was certain that it would be able to catch its prey mid-leap.

Just as Cloudhawk leapt out from behind his hiding spot, the sweeper's arm flexed as it hurled its incredibly sharp javelin with enough power to penetrate clean through a man's body.

Time seemed to slow down. The dangerous mutabeast inched ever closer in mid-air, as did that lethal javelin. Cloudhawk frantically tried to twist his body in midair, and the javelin sliced a deep wound through his chest as it flew past him. He had almost miraculously dodged that strike!

Sssssss!

The enormous black spider struck out with its limbs. Just as it was about to latch onto Cloudhawk with them, the oncoming javelin hit it almost perfectly on its head, causing it to let out an agonized screech!

The sweeper stared, somewhat stunned. It certainly hadn't expected something like this to happen!

In that brief instant when the sweeper stood there dumbfounded, Cloudhawk fell to the ground then rolled to his feet, clutching his hands over the gaping wound across his chest as he furiously fled into another one of the tunnels. Just as the sweeper was about to chase after him, the injured and enraged mutabeasts spider clambered to its feet, then leapt straight towards the sweeper.

"GRAH!" The sweeper was knocked down but immediately drew a short knife and plunged it into the spider's soft abdomen. As for the giant spider, it used its sharp, venomous fangs to bite at the sweeper's neck and shoulders. The two deadly creatures

began to furiously attack each other, and as for Cloudhawk?

He had long since disappeared into the tunnels.

Chapter 5
The Mysterious Jewel

Cloudhawk had just barely been able to escape, but he managed to find a quiet corner to hide behind and rest in. His chest was blazing with pain. When he pressed a hand against it, his hand came away smeared in sticky fluids. Although he couldn't tell how badly he had been injured, the wound was definitely a serious one. Wounds like this were extremely dangerous; even if he didn't die due to blood loss, the wound would probably become infected, resulting in him dying an agonizing death.

Perhaps due to his physical weakness, or perhaps due to his severe loss of blood, Cloudhawk's mind was growing increasingly hazy. His eyelids began to droop downwards. He really wanted to close his eyes and rest for a while, but he knew that he absolutely could not do such a thing.

This was a dangerous place, filled with countless dangerous creatures, and the stench of his blood would definitely attract those bloodthirsty beasts. For him to fall asleep right now meant that he would never wake up again.

He was tired. He was in pain. He was beaten up. His willpower was almost used up. Death would be a form of escape, right.

Cloudhawk forced that thought down. He hadn't even been able to leave the ruins, much less the wilderness. He hadn't fulfilled any of the promises he had made himself. How could he accept death in a place like this? The old-timer would laugh at him. He had to survive. He had to live!

His desire to stay alive enkindled his spirit, like a stubborn flicker of flame that began to rise once more. His spirits roused, Cloudhawk removed his bloodstained clothes, then tore several strips of cloth and used it to tightly bandage his wounds. He had to find the exit as soon as possible. He had to leave this damnable place!

The light from the fluorescent lichen in this place provided him with a vague idea of where to go. However, the underground tunnels were laid out in such a complicated way that Cloudhawk had long ago lost his sense of direction. He had no idea which way he should go.

But right then, that strange, subtle sensation appeared once more. It was as though something was calling out towards his subconscious.

Cloudhawk wasn't certain as to whether this feeling was a real one or an illusory one, but by now he had no other options to take. He decided to entrust his destiny to this sixth sense and follow the complicated underground tunnels in a downwards descent.

His physical condition was rapidly deteriorating, and this place was as complicated as any maze. Cloudhawk walked for several dozen minutes without being able to make it out of the tunnels, but that subconscious sensation was growing stronger and stronger. As he continued to move towards the direction the sensation was coming from, he actually saw an exit that glimmered with some faint light.

He had made it! He had escaped! This had to be the escape. He had finally found it!

Fuck those diggers. The only thing the matters is that I'm getting out of this alive!

Overjoyed, Cloudhawk quickened his footsteps. Just as he was about to walk out from the 'exit', he came to a sudden halt as a stunned look appeared on his face. *No. NO! SHIT!*

This place was a five-way intersection. The so-called 'light'? That was just torch light coming from the torches that hung in this place. The walls here were filled with neatly arrayed bone spears and various tools, as well as a large amount of wind-dried smoked meat that hung from giant hooks. What really terrified Cloudhawk… was the fact that there had to be at least thirty or forty sweepers here!

This was no exit. This was the sweeper base! Instead of finding the exit, Cloudhawk had stumbled upon the heart of the maze?!

There were also four or five tied up scavengers who had been captured alive and brought to this place by the sweepers. Like animals for the slaughter, they were completely unable to move or flee. Their faces were deathly pale with despair and horror, but their mouths were completely gagged, preventing them from saying anything at all.

Given the brutal disposition of the sweepers, it was guaranteed that the scavengers would have horrendous fates in store for them.

There were actually both adult sweepers as well as young sweepers here. However, all

of them looked fairly similar, and their bodies were all so tightly knotted with those strange growths of flesh that they looked like tree-men. These sweepers were able to multiply, despite their strange mutation, and they could even pass down their mutations to the next generation. This truly was quite rare in the wastelands.

The sweepers were gathered together, kneeling in front of an upraised dais as they mumbled some arcane, unintelligible words. It was almost as if they were pious believers who were praying to a higher power.

At the very top of the dais there was a pitch-black jewel that actually defied the laws of gravity and simply hovered there in the air. It was most likely this supernatural phenomenon which caused the foolish sweepers to feel a sense of veneration and dread towards it, which was why they prostrated themselves before it as if it were a divine relic.

Cloudhawk was stunned as well. What on earth was this?! He had an inexplicable feeling that the strange, subtle sensations seemed to be coming from this mysterious jewel. It was the jewel which was emanating that strange song which had drawn Cloudhawk to this place, and when he actually saw it he was actually spellbound for a few moments.

He was nothing more than a humble, low-born scavenger, after all. When had he ever seen such marvelous items?

The sweepers completed their rituals of obeisance. Two of them pulled out a guillotine-like instrument as the others dragged the hog-tied captives over. They lifted up the guillotine's blade, then pressed the hands of a scavenger beneath it.

"No. NO!" The scavenger let out a scream… and the heavy guillotine blade descended with a sickening crunch.

The scavenger let out muffled, despairing howls as his two hands were completely severed. The other four scavengers were so terrified that their bodies turned so limp and they lost complete control of their bowels. The sweepers filled a vessel with the spurting blood, then poured it over one of the young children.

The skin of these mutants seemed to have an absorptive property. After the blood was poured over the child, it was quickly absorbed into his body. The dozens of sweepers began to celebrate wildly, using the guillotine to chop the scavenger's arms into

multiple sections, almost as if they were chopping vegetables. They then linked the meat up to metal poles, preparing to smoke the meat.

Brutal. Berserk! These twisted creatures delighted in torturing other living beings!

The crazed cries of the scavengers brought Cloudhawk back to reality. He frantically shook his head, quickly coming back to his senses. By now, he was so frightened that his body was once more covered with cold sweat.

Cloudhawk really wanted to slap himself! How could he fall into a daze at a time like this? Was he tired of living? This place was filled with deadly sweepers. If he was captured by them, he would end up like those poor scavengers. They'd first chop his hands and legs into multiple pieces, then torment him endlessly before letting him die.

Better to run right away!

Cloudhawk carefully rose to his feet and edged backwards. But right at this moment, the scavenger at the very end was released from his bonds. Just as they were about to force him forwards and severe his hands, he seemed to gain a burst of terror-born supernatural strength and speed. He somehow tore loose of the sweeper's grips, then dodged the nearby sweepers and fled from them… straight towards Cloudhawk's tunnel.

His struggles were useless. One of the sweepers sunk a flying hook into his leg, causing him to fall to the ground. Just as he was being dragged back, from the corner of his eyes he saw Cloudhawk tiptoeing backwards through the tunnels.

Cloudhawk's heart clenched. He had a bad feeling about this. He frantically dove back into his original hiding position… but it was too late.

"Save me!"

"Save me!"

"SAVE ME!!!!"

As the scavenger was being dragged back, he clawed at the ground with his fingernails, leaving deep furrows in the earth. He was screaming so hysterically that he didn't even notice how his fingernails were splintering apart.

He knew that there was no way he could be rescued… but he wanted to stay alive! Like a drowning man he would clutch at any straw he could find, no matter how thin!

Cloudhawk felt a chill course down his spine. Once again, he felt that sensation of incredible danger!

The sweepers had ceased their celebrations. They all had puzzled looks on their faces, and several of them pulled out their spears as vigilant looks appeared in their eyes.

Damn. He had been discovered!

The scavenger who had been dragged back was killed by a single blow from a spear. As for the four or five spear-wielding sweepers, they began to slowly make their way towards Cloudhawk.

Cloudhawk could sense danger enveloping him, making it hard for him to so much as breathe. He couldn't help but begin to tremble as he pulled his sharp metal shard from his waistband. Right now, this was the only weapon he had.

Should he fight back? There was no way such a small piece of metal would pose a threat to these sweepers. Any of them would be able to kill him with ease!

Should he flee? There was no way he could run faster than the sweepers. Last time, he had only escaped thanks to stupid luck. There was no way he would be so lucky yet again… and he didn't even have the energy needed to run!

Was he supposed to just wait here for death?!

Death wasn't always terrifying. However, waiting for death to come while being completely unable to fight back was truly unbearable!

Cloudhawk had no plans, no ideas for dealing with the situation before him. With each step the sweepers took, death drew closer and closer to him.

The sweepers were all quite puzzled as well. They didn't hear any sounds at all. Was there really something hidden here? No matter what, they had to at least search the area!

The sweepers drew closer and closer. Five meters. Four meters. Three meters…

Cloudhawk's heart was frozen with fear. He didn't even dare to breathe; all he could do was pray frantically. *Don't come over here. Please, no matter what, don't come over here!*

But prayers like this were useless. The sweepers continued their advance.

Cloudhawk tightly gripped his metal shard, his entire body taut. If he was going to die no matter what, he was going to make a go of it!

The sweepers had extremely tough skins, right? Then he would stab them in the eyes!

In two more steps, the sweepers would be in a position to see Cloudhawk. Cloudhawk was already prepared to attack… but right at this moment, the sound of clear, ringing gunfire burst forth from another one of the tunnels. The sound of gunfire was exceptionally jarring, given how still this place had been.

It was the fat man!

That damnably sly fellow. He had used the scavengers as bait to help his group attract the attention of the sweepers. After the scavengers were all dead, they followed the tracks to locate the sweeper camp, then launched a surprise attack!

Damn him! Damn him! That treacherous bastard! Because of him, dozens of scavengers had died miserable deaths. Because of him, Cloudhawk himself had very nearly died.

However… right now, Cloudhawk had to thank him!

Two shots of gunfire rang out nearby as the fat man led his forces charging into the sweeper camp. How could the sweepers ignore them? They immediately all raised their weapons and began to move towards the attackers. As for the sweepers who were just about to discover Cloudhawk, they also joined their fellows in resisting these new invaders.

Every single one of the dozens of sweepers had left, and the sounds of an extraordinarily fierce battle could be heard erupting from the other tunnel!

Would that fat white man, the muscular black man, and their seven or eight mercenaries be able to defeat so many dangerous sweepers? Cloudhawk panted raggedly as he left his hiding spot, slightly dizzy from the lack of oxygen due to having

held his breath for so long. Right now, there was only one thought in his mind – run!

Just as Cloudhawk was about to act on this thought, he suddenly hesitated.

The jewel! The jewel seemed quite extraordinary. The sweepers had all gone off to fight the mercenaries. Why didn't he take the risk of stealing the jewel from them?

When most people fled from the face of death, they would flee without any hesitation and without looking back. Cloudhawk's train of thought was undoubtedly quite unusual. However, he was born into a humble, lamentable life; he didn't want to give up any chance or any item which might change his destiny. He already had the vague feeling that this jewel possessed certain inexplicable properties!

He was going to take the chance!

Cloudhawk charged into the sweeper camp, stepping over the mangled corpses that littered the ground. There was no fluorescent lichen on the walls here; the walls had been completely covered with all sorts of strange paintings.

One of the paintings was of a large group of hideous, vile-looking mutants who were surrounding a similarly hideous creature. Perhaps these tree-like mutants were members of this large group?

As for the creature itself, it was extremely large. It was dressed in strange leather armor and looked almost like a general. He was leading and commanding the mutants in a war against their foes. Their foes were ordinary human beings who bore firearms, and the ordinary humans were being commanded by a tall, resplendent being.

On one side was a creature that looked as vile and as hideous as a demon. On the other side was a lustrous, dazzling figure that looked like a divinity.

On one side were the hideous, disgusting mutants. On the other side were the ordinary human beings!

This clearly was a battle between darkness and light, a final battle between evil and good.

There were too many paintings, and Cloudhawk was in no mood to look at them all. He frantically charged towards the dais. He was going to grab the jewel, then flee. He didn't care about anything else!

At least, that was the plan. Just as Cloudhawk was about to ascend the dais, he once more had a sense of great danger impending. He came to an immediate, sudden halt… and as he did, a javelin shot towards him at high speed.

Swoosh!

It just barely missed him, flying past his nose. If it hadn't been for the fact that Cloudhawk had come to a sudden halt, he probably would've been pierced by this javelin!

Although he had managed to dodge the specter of death, he still felt a sense of terror. He hadn't expected, nor had he noticed, that not all of the sweepers had left this place. This time, there really was no place for him to hide!

Chapter 6
Passing Over

Cloudhawk could hear a low growl emanating from behind him. This caused his heart to sink even further. There was a scavenger below the dais, and his hideous, tumor-warped face was contorted into a mask of rage. The scavenger was gnashing its jagged black teeth as it glared viciously at him.

There was actually a sweeper here!

This sweeper was fairly small, roughly the same size as Cloudhawk. The vast majority of sweepers had gone off to fight the mercenaries, leaving only the smallest one behind. The junior sweeper picked up yet another javelin and was just about to throw it. Although the sweeper was young, he was able to throw javelins with enough speed and power to pierce a man's body.

Cloudhawk furiously leapt down from the dais, throwing himself towards the sweeper and knocking him to the ground. Cloudhawk used the sharp metal shard in his right hand to furiously stab at the sweeper, but the sweeper's body was simply too tough. Cloudhawk's own hand was sliced open by the metal shard, but he wasn't able to pierce the sweeper's body.

Although the young sweeper was inexperienced, his body was still far tougher than Cloudhawk's. A single kick from his two legs sent Cloudhawk into the air, and he landed on the ground over a meter away. Blood was leaking from Cloudhawk's nose and mouth, and the world before his eyes had just turned blurry. He randomly tossed out the metal shard as hard as he could.

Crack!

The sharp metal shard actually struck the young sweeper, but it wasn't able to cause much damage at all. The young sweeper rose to his feet, then used his javelin to stab at the human on the ground.

Cloudhawk's animalistic instincts warned him of the impending danger. He almost immediately rolled away to dodge the attack, and the javelin split apart as it stabbed

into the ground.

Although this sweeper was very young, he was every bit as strong as a normal adult human. The sweeper let out a low growl, not having expected this scavenger to be so agile. He tossed away the shattered bits of javelin-wood in his hands, then turned and grabbed a long knife from one of the cabinets behind him.

Cloudhawk picked up the broken half of the javelin. Just as the sweeper was turning towards him, he used virtually all of his energy to jump to his feet, then delivered a two-handed blow with the javelin as he drove it towards the sweeper's head.

This strike used up almost all of Cloudhawk's energy.

Crunch! The tip of the broken javelin was driven straight through the sweeper's left eye, going in by quite a few inches. A large amount of black blood and other viscous liquids spurted out from the injury.

The sweeper let out an agonized, maddened cry as he wildly lashed out with the long knife in his hands. As Cloudhawk dodged backwards, his shoulder was cut by one of the chops, resulting in a section of his flesh being sheared off.

Agonizing pain!

Cloudhawk retreated back to the dais. The young sweeper wildly flailed about for a few moments, then finally fell to the ground, a look of agony and confusion in his remaining eye.

Cloudhawk panted heavily, completely exhausted and feeble. He stared silently at the corpse of the young sweeper for quite a few moments. If the young sweeper hadn't suffered a mutation, he probably would've been a human of the same age as Cloudhawk himself. He was a sentient being who would've had parents, brothers, family…

A pained smile appeared on Cloudhawk's face as he turned, dragging his weary body up the steps of the dais. He stretched out his blood-soaked right hand, then clenched it around the levitating jewel.

Boom!

The entire world seemed to shake. A swirl of dust appeared above the dais, and both

Cloudhawk and the strange jewel simultaneously vanished. It was as though they had evaporated into thin air, disappearing from the world!

……

In the instant that Cloudhawk's hand closed around the jewel, a stream of blindingly bright light leaked out from between his fingers. It was as though he wasn't holding a stone in his hands; rather, he was holding a miniature sun. In the same instant, a strange type of energy surged through his hands and into the rest of his body, seeming to infiltrate every single one of his cells.

The incredibly powerful surge of energy covered the entire area, causing space itself to twist and distort.

Cloudhawk had never seen such a horrifying sight before. Everything before him was twisting and distorting. It was as though the world around him was a bucket of water, and someone was using a stick to kick up a whirlpool. The invisible energy furiously tore at every cell in his body, ripping every single one into a million little pieces.

The entire world had disappeared. Cloudhawk had been brought into a new, strange world with no light, no dark, no matter, and no energy. It was a world filled with many rippling strings, some straight and some circular. Each time one of the strings was thrummed, a strange sound could be heard.

It was like hundreds of millions of guitar strings being played at the same time, forming an entire world unto themselves, with Cloudhawk being part of it. Cloudhawk was able to maintain his clarity of thought, and stared in absolute terror at the bizarre world around him. He wasn't certain if he was alive or not.

The countless strings began to join together, forming all sorts of strange, chaotic lines of light which then blended and twisted together to form images. Cloudhawk had been 'weightless' this entire time, but he suddenly sensed a powerful force drag him downwards.

Bang! Cloudhawk landed against an extremely tough and coarse stone floor.

Cloudhawk pressed his hands against the stone floor, wanting to throw up. Unfortunately, there was nothing in his stomach. His head was in a complete daze right now, and his ears were ringing. He couldn't even see clearly. All of his senses were in a state of complete chaos, and he wasn't even able to tell if the world before him was

a real one or a fake one. He had never experienced anything like this before.

Slowly, his senses began to stabilize. As it did, the first feeling he had was… hot! *Odd. Isn't it night time? Why is the area around me filled with blinding sunlight?*

It was so hot. Where was he?

Cloudhawk's nose was filled with a sulfurous smell. As his vision grew clearer and clearer, the look of astonishment on his face grew greater and greater as well. What appeared before him was something which completely surpassed his wildest imaginings.

This was a world where the black stone ground was filled with so many crevices, it looked as though countless termites had bored through it. This entire world was like a piece of glass that someone had viciously stomped down on but had been unable to completely destroy. The chasms in the world were unfathomably deep, but flickers of flames could be vaguely seen, as though the fires of hell might erupt from within the chasms at any moment.

Far away in front of him was a series of egg-shaped mountain ranges, shrouded in a layer of gauze-like dust storms. The mountains seemed to have been sculpted by human hands in the past, and there had to be tens of thousands of those sculptures carved into the mountains. They were like chess pieces scattered across a board in a neat, orderly, and awe-inspiring manner.

Where the hell was he? Was he dreaming?

The air here was so hot that Cloudhawk could barely breathe. He immediately raised his head to stare towards the distant skies… and what he saw caused his eyes to nearly pop out of their sockets.

There were two dazzling, light-emitting entities in the skies; a large sun and a small sun. They hung in the skies at the same time, emanating blinding halos of light that baked this cracked, parched earth. Aside from the two suns, there was also an utterly enormous red gas giant that filled nearly half of the skies. Two enormous windstorms could be seen on the gas giant in the form of two giant yellow 'spots', and a slanted ring of yellow light could be seen circling around this gas giant. This truly was an absolutely stunning sight!

How could his weak little heart possibly withstand such an incredible, unbelievable

transformation in the world?

“AH!!!!” Cloudhawk felt as though the blood in his body was flowing backwards, and he couldn’t help but let out an uncontrollable, shrill scream. The jewel in his hands once more lit up, and that strange surge of energy once more twisted the world around him. There was no way Cloudhawk could endure this transfer process a second time, and he immediately fell completely unconscious.

The spatial ripples around him vanished, as did he himself. The world around him remained as deathly silent and forlorn as ever, as though no living creatures had ever appeared on its surface before.

……

Slyfox and Mad Dog had completed their bloody battle. They had suffered a few wounds, but the mutants had been completely destroyed and almost every last one of them had been wiped out.

“Man, late-stage strength metas like you really are almost unstoppable in close combat.” The fat man roared with laughter, then lit a cigarette for Mad Dog. “These were a rare breed of mutants; intelligent yet highly mutated, and with the ability to stably propagate future generations. Every single one of these corpses will earn us a ton of money. This deal will keep us fed for half a year!”

Mad Dog took a deep puff of his cigarette. He was also quite happy with his performance in this battle. “You always end up spending all of your money on women, you randy bastard. How long do you really think this money will last you? I’m warning you upfront; you are NOT allowed to touch my share of the money!”

“The hell?! Man, you really don’t know how to talk to others!”

The reason why they had been so successful was all thanks to the fat man first releasing so much bait into the tunnels. It had allowed the two of them to home in on the mutant camp. If it hadn’t been for that… given how complicated the layout of the tunnels was, they probably wouldn’t have been able to locate it that quickly. These mutants were smart ones, after all.

“Hey, boss!” A mercenary up ahead suddenly called out to them. “One of the scavs is still alive!”

A living scav? No way!

An emaciated youth was lying there on the ground, his face as pale as a sheet of paper and devoid of all blood. The kid had completely passed out.

“Oho! The kid actually made it?”

“You gonna take’m back with us, boss?”

“Fuck that. You gonna be the one responsible for feeding him if I do?” Clearly, none of the scavengers knew what Slyfox was like and how he acted. He didn’t even view scavengers as being members of the same race as him; why would he ever fulfill his promises to them? He was, however, quite puzzled. “The kid ran around here for hours but managed to avoid suffering any injuries at all. He really does have some bullshit luck.”

“Look at his chest.” An intrigued, clever look flashed through Mad Dog’s eyes. “Judging from the blood patterns, there should’ve been a wound there. A deep one, at that.”

The fat man hesitated for a moment. “You tellin’ me…”

“Give’m a try and we’ll know for sure.” Mad Dog pulled out a knife from his waistband. The knife flashed so incredibly quickly that it could barely be seen, and in the next instant it was already back in its sheath. A bloody wound had appeared on the boy’s left arm, and fresh blood began to leak out of it. Roughly ten or so seconds later, the bloody wound slowly began to close as the flesh and skin started to stitch itself together at a visible pace.

“Fuck my eyes. He’s a meta!”

The fat man’s face tightened while Mad Dog frowned. From the looks of things, the kid was actually a metahuman, but he only had first-stage regenerative abilities. It didn’t make sense for him to have been able to heal such a deep wound on his chest. What the hell was going on?

“Take’m back with us, rookies!” Although there was no time for a detailed examination and no way to figure out what his specific power was, his healing speed alone proved that he had first-stage regenerative abilities. Anyone with a superpower was considered a metahuman, and any metahuman was worth training.

And so, the unconscious boy's fate was completely changed!

……

Cloudhawk was dreaming. The contents of his dream were quite similar to that of the paintings he had seen. A group of hideous, evil, yet incredibly strong creatures were leading tens of thousands of mutants in a war against the human race. They were brutal, savage, and unspeakably cruel, and the human race suffered repeated losses against them, to the point where humanity was nearly wiped out.

And yet… right at this moment, those radiant, sacred beings suddenly appeared. They gifted mankind with all sorts of miraculous weapons, and in the end they joined forces with humanity to fight back against the tide, turning defeat into victory.

The dream was a scattered one which came and went in fits and starts. The exact details were unclear, but the dream itself felt strangely real, almost as though he had personally taken part in it before.

Chapter 7
Metahuman

It seemed to happen in an instant, but it also felt as though a thousand years had gone by.

Cloudhawk slowly opened his eyes. He realized that he was lying out in the open, and he frantically sat up while scanning right and left. The area was littered with piles of debris and ruined buildings. They were in the ruins, and it was already day.

Had it all been a dream? The injury on his chest was gone. The injury on his shoulder was gone. The place where the sweeper had kicked him and caused internal bleeding was completely pain-free.

Even the wounds he had taken from the beating the scar-faced man had given him had completely disappeared. It couldn't have ALL been a dream, right?

Cloudhawk could sense that his hands were clenched around something. When he lowered his gaze to take a look, his eyes narrowed. Wasn't this the jewel which he had taken from the sweeper camp?

The jewel wasn't shining at all; in fact, it no longer emanated the slightest bit of light. However, its formerly smooth surface was now covered with many slender 'veins' of blood. It was as though his blood had been drained into it, with some left being on its surface.

The jewel looked completely ordinary and unremarkable. Anyone who saw it would think it to be nothing more than an ordinary black rock. Aside from the many dark-red lines matting its surface, there really was nothing particularly special about it at all.

"Woke up?" The fat man walked over towards Cloudhawk. Cloudhawk hurriedly hid away the black stone, then looked somewhat nervously at the fat man. This man always had a merry look on his face, but he was actually an incredibly sinister person. The fat man, however, didn't seem to mind the look on his face. He actually tossed Cloudhawk a piece of bread. "Eat something first."

Cloudhawk hesitated for a few moments, but he was so hungry that he accepted the bread and began to gnaw at it. The piece of bread was as tough as wood, but to Cloudhawk it was an absolute delicacy.

The mercenaries were busy dragging the various mutant corpses into rainproof bags. As for the fat man, he just lit a cigarette as he sat down. "Y'know, at first I was just lying to ya. But I just changed my mind. I'll take you to our outpost."

Why did the fat man suddenly change his mind and become so nice? Cloudhawk had personally witnessed him send dozens of scavengers to their deaths, treating them as if they were just garbage!

"You might not know this, but you are now a metahuman." The fat man didn't wait for Cloudhawk to answer the obvious question. "And don't ask me what metas are. Fucked if I know. All I know is that we are a new breed of humans whose bodies have been improved in certain ways and are much more powerful than ordinary people. I'm a meta, Mad Dog's a meta, and every other member of our mercenary company is a meta. Now, it seems you are a meta as well."

A surge of excitement began to enter Cloudhawk's heart. Did this mean he would become as powerful as this chubby white man and the muscular black man in the future?

The fat man took a puff on his cigarettes, then continued, "Buuuut… don't have too many expectations. There are many different types of metas. There are strength metas, agility metas, control metas, perception metas, intelligence metas… and as for you, you are nothing more than a healing meta."

Cloudhawk didn't understand. "A healing meta?"

"Mad Dog's a strength meta, which is why he can snap bones as easily as snappin' twigs. Strength metas are suited for becoming close-combat warriors. I'm a control meta; I have absolutely perfect control over every single part of my body, allowing me to aim and move with absolute precision. That's why I can shoot your balls off from a hundred paces without even looking. I can control any tool or weapon with perfect precision."

"Then what about me?" Cloudhawk was rather impatient.

"You?" The fat man snickered. "All you do is heal a bit faster, but what the fuck good is

that? If a bullet hits you in the head, you are as dead as anyone else. That's why healing metas are the most useless of all metas. I mean, I can't exactly use you to go block a mutabeasts attack for me, right?"

The most useless type of metahuman? Cloudhawk couldn't help but feel a bit disappointment.

"Heh!" The fat man gave him a hard pat. "Cheer up. Less than one person in a hundred is a meta. You are already pretty lucky! Healing metas might not be useful, but at least you'll recover your energy much faster than ordinary people. That means you'll be useful as a laborer. Don't worry! Just follow me."

A thunderous booming sound suddenly rang out from the direction of the wastelands. This sound started off small but quickly grew much louder, almost as though it was travelling at such incredible speeds through the wastelands that it was generating sonic booms.

"Fuck! Finally!" The fat man flicked away his cigarette and rose to his feet, his hands resting against the pistols around his waist. He barked towards the others, "Everyone, look lively!"

The resting mercenaries all jumped to their feet, and Mad Dog drew out his two snowy blades as well.

Cloudhawk didn't understand why the mercenaries were acting this way, but the thunderous booms coming from the wastelands were incredibly close by now. When he turned to squint towards their direction, his eyes suddenly widened. He saw something so completely inconceivable that his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

A small black dot had appeared in the night skies. It seemed to have come from the distant heavens, and as it slowly cruised through the heavens it grew larger and larger.

It was actually a large airship that was at least a hundred meters long!

There were a couple of obvious patches in the airship's enormous gas sac, and spots of rust could be seen throughout its metallic frame. Evidence of makeshift repairs could be seen everywhere, and some parts of it were actually bulging outwards, as though they were about to break apart at any moment. Overall, however, this was an incredibly complete airship.

Its exterior walls and copper tubing were all neatly arrayed, and the engines at the back were constantly emitting plenty of hot steam as four sets of propellers furiously rotated about, ensuring that the ship was able to advance at an even keel. On each side of the airship there were black cannons protruding from various openings, bringing a sense of awe and menace.

In the eyes of Cloudhawk, this enormous thing was something out of the very legends.

The airship slowly began to descend, finally coming to a halt in front of the mercenaries' campfire. As it did, a powerful wind blew past, sending rocks tumbling across the ground and half-extinguishing the campire. The wind was so strong that Cloudhawk could barely open his eyes.

Clank! The rusty door to the airship swung open, and a black figure emerged from the wind and the sand.

This man was tall and very muscular. He was dressed in a set of black leather clothes that completely covered his entire body, exposing nothing to the elements. He wore a black breathing mask that was shaped like a stork's beak, and the mask was connected to quite a few wires and tubes. The faint sound of heavy breathing could be heard coming from that mask, and white steam could be seen coming from the exhaust tubes. In truth, he looked like a monstrous humanoid with the face of a long-billed bird.

A look of extreme wariness was on Mad Dog's face.

The fat man looked the way he usually did, but his hands never strayed away from his two pistols as he sauntered towards the black-garbed man. "We've already found the targets you wanted. Where's the stuff we want?"

The black-garbed man didn't even glance at the fat man. He just gestured with a hand, causing several men to emerge from the armored airship. These men were dressed in white hazmat suits, and they came rushing out with toolboxes at the ready as they moved towards the corpses on the ground. They pulled open the rainproof body bags, then glanced through the bodies. One of the white-garbed men nodded. "They look fine!"

The black-garbed man tossed a box to the fat man's feet.

One of the rookie mercenaries went to pick up the box, then opened it up. There were multiple firearms neatly arrayed inside the box, as well as a large amount of

gunpowder and several needles of various colors.

The fat man let out a sigh of relief. “Happy doin’ business!”

“Wait a moment!” For the first time, the black-garbed man spoke. His gravelly voice sounded like that of a tightly controlled wild beast’s, and when it came out from that breathing mask it sounded incredibly strange. “Did any of you find anything unusual? For example, a strange rock.”

Cloudhawk’s heart nearly came to a stop!

The fat man frowned. “This place is filled with rocks. Didn’t see any special ones.”

“Are you certain?”

The black-garbed man slowly raised his head.

Even though his face was completely covered by that strange mask, all of the mercenaries could still sense an incredibly dangerous and sharp gaze sweep through them, causing all of them to take a few nervous steps back.

Everyone instantly felt as though they had been pierced through by that gaze. As for the fat man, he was rather irritated. “The hell is this all about?”

“Nothing.” The black-garbed man withdrew his gaze, then said slowly, “That stone is completely useless to you. If you are able to find it in the future, I’ll pay you a hundred times the commission you earned today!”

The mercenaries all sucked in deep breaths. What? A hundred times the commission? The commission for this mission was already equivalent to an entire year’s worth of commissions. To multiply that figure a hundredfold… fuck, what the hell type of rock was this?!

By now, the corpses of the sweepers had been loaded into the airship.

The four propellers once more began to rotate, kicking up another storm of wind and sand as the enormous airship began to slowly rise into the air. The copper tubes once more began to generate those booming sounds that sounded like the rattling coughs of someone suffering from lung disease before they finally began to spurt out large streams of air. The airship slowly began to speed up, then finally disappeared off into

the horizon.

The fat man lifted up the chest, a completely satisfied look on his face. He walked next to the wide-eyed and slack-jawed Cloudhawk, then gave him a hard slap on the shoulders. “Crazy, right? That thing is a helluva high-class toy!”

Cloudhawk tightly clenched the rock in his hand, trying to do his best to act normally. His voice, however, couldn’t help but quaver a bit. “W-who were they?”

“A bunch of mysterious bastards. Who knows? Some of the real rulers of the wastelands, that’s for sure!” The fat man clearly didn’t know much about them either. “Doesn’t really matter. Small fry like you will probably never have a chance to meet people like them. Hell, best if you don’t. Those guys really do kill people without even batting an eyelid. To them, we’re nothing more than ants!”

Were they truly so strong that even these powerful mercenaries looked up to them in awe?

Cloudhawk had no idea what sort of amazing treasure he had stumbled upon. The mysterious rock just lay there calmly within his hand, and when it pressed against his flesh he felt as though the rock was part of his body.

The fat man called out in a loud voice, “Form up, form up! We’re going back!”

The mercenaries all whooped in celebration as they boarded their patchwork vehicle. The crude, multi-wheeled behemoth let out a few angry rumbles, then began to charge through the uneven wastelands.

Chapter 8
Blackflag Outpost

The setting sun was as red as blood, staining the ground with its crimson light. Sand was being kicked up throughout the desert wastelands.

The patchwork vehicle was like a berserk animal that was charging straight towards the outpost. Moments before it collided with the gates, the driver furiously spun the wheel, causing the car to come to a loud, screeching halt in a horizontal 'parked' position. The wheels dug two deep gouges into the soft earth before the vehicle was finally stabilized, even though it shuddered and clanked as though it was about to burst with fire. A few pieces of unknown machinery actually broke off and fell to the ground.

"Ahaha!" The fat man let out a jubilant laugh, not worried about the vehicle at all as he snuffed out his cigarette on the dashboard. "We're back!"

After suffering through this unspeakably rocky ride, Cloudhawk couldn't help but start to puke up a storm. Alas, there was no food in his stomach at all, and so all he was able to puke up was bile. As for the surrounding mercenaries, they all started to laugh and mock their latest rookie.

"Hahaha!"

"This kid is such a pussy. He's useless!"

"If you wanna go back and be a scav, there's still time!"

Cloudhawk felt as though his intestines were falling apart. Who the hell could endure a car ride like that?

These mercenaries drove like suicidal madmen. This was Cloudhawk's second time riding a car. For him to be able to endure it for as long as he had was already quite impressive. Cloudhawk lifted his head up and was about to start arguing with the mercenaries, but his words died on his lips as he stared numbly towards the front.

This was a place which could actually be called a town. It was ringed with a layer of bristling steel wire fences, with many ruined tires, boulders, and sandbags stacked together to form a defensive 'wall', with a series of wooden watchtowers overlooking from behind. The watchtowers were roughly seven or eight meters tall, and each watchtower had numerous archer guards within them.

"Tartarus mercs. Open up!"

The 'gate' was really just a heavily modified jumbo truck that was parked horizontally in front of an opening. Once the guards verified their identities the truck drove off to one side, allowing them to enter. The outpost was filled with many ragged, makeshift houses that were clustered in a haphazard fashion, the vast majority of which had people within them. At the very center, there was a tall building that seemed exceptionally eye-catching.

So this was an excavator base?

Cloudhawk's heart was filled with incredible eagerness and excitement. All his life, for as far back as he could remember, he had been a scavenger who had been trying to survive the ruins as best he could. Every day, he ate bugs and grass to stay alive while drinking highly contaminated rainwater. Becoming an excavator… this was Cloudhawk's dream!

The outpost was now before his very eyes. Was he about to discard his former life of dining on the wind and sleeping out in the open?

Some of the guards walked over to greet them. "Y'all have been gone for several days. Must've made a killing this time!"

The outpost guards were dressed in bronze-colored leather armor, and they wore both wind goggles and breathing masks that covered half of their faces. Their gazes were focused on Cloudhawk, and one of them said in a rather malicious way, "Hey, a fresh face? That's against regs!"

Regs? In this era, there were no such things as regulations!

These people were nothing more than watchdogs. Mad Dog and Slyfox didn't hold them in any regard, but there was no point in offending them on purpose. In addition, they really had made a killing on this mission. Slyfox magnanimously offered the guards half a pack of cigarettes. "A killing? We risk our necks every day. You guys have

it much better. This kid is a new recruit. Take it easy on us, arrright?"

"Slyfox, no need to be so polite. How could we make things hard for you? Hurry on in!"

Mad Dog gave the rather dazed Cloudhawk a hard push, and he immediately scurried inside alongside the mercenaries.

In an era of chaos, building up a homeland was no easy task. Everyone had to start from scratch, and everything you needed you'd have to manufacture for yourself. Blackflag Outpost was fully equipped and outfitting, making it quite a rare sight in the wastelands. It had inns, bars, warehouses, parking lots… it essentially had everything.

As a central excavator hub, it also had all sorts of things for sale. Metal instruments, strange parts, leather and cloth… all types of shops and stalls could be found here. If you were lucky enough and skilled enough, you'd be able to cobble together a suit of armor from those various parts and components, or perhaps a pistol. In fact, you might even be able to assemble your own vehicle.

This was an excavator base. A completely different world!

"Blackflag Outpost aint a charity operation. Every single person who lives here has to pay a price for it. Wanna enjoy the resources this place has to offer? Then use your life to fight for it!" The fat man summarized it thusly: "This place is Heaven for the strong, but Hell for the weak."

After speaking, he reached down subconsciously to grab a cigarette, only to remember that he had already given away that half-pack. He let out a few curses towards the gate guards, then continued to speak to Cloudhawk. "Remember. If you aint strong enough, then this place won't be much better than the wastelands. In fact, it could be worse!"

Right at this moment, Cloudhawk noticed a number of skeletally thin women dressed in tattered rags who were standing by the roadside. Ignoring the piercing cold, they put on all sorts of alluring poses as they tried to seduce the men passing by, their faces filled with looks of entreaty.

"What are they doing?"

"In this day and age, men trade their lives while women trade their flesh. That's how the world works!"

Cloudhawk was slightly stunned.

"You'll see people like them everywhere. Give'm a piece of bread and you can play with their bodies however you like. The tents, the back rooms, the alleyways, the intersections… they really are everywhere." Slyfox was an experienced old hand in this regard, and he put his knowledge on full display, not really caring about whether Cloudhawk understood or not. "Problem is, the streetwalkers are no good. Most of them have some mutations, and if you screw'm enough you'll catch something from'm. The better ones are generally in the bars or are part of someone's private collection. Those'll be a bit more expensive."

Slyfox continued to impart his wisdom, but Cloudhawk didn't listen to a single thing the fat man said. His attention was completely focused upon a woman who was sitting on the ground. She was so gaunt that she seemed to have no flesh on her bones at all; she really was nothing more than skin and bones. A festering sarcoma covered half of her face, and most of her hair had fallen out, revealing a large number of pus-filled pimples. In her arms, she held an infant wrapped in tattered rags.

The foul stench of rot and decay emanated from the rags. Clearly, the infant had died many days ago.

The look in the woman's eyes stirred something in Cloudhawk's heart. He had seen this look on far, far too many occasions, a look of despair, pain, and complete numbness, almost as if she had fallen into a hell of endless darkness, never to see a sliver of light again. Her ruined body was still struggling at death's door, but she herself was mentally dead.

"The fuck you looking at?" Slyfox irritably slapped Cloudhawk upside the head. "I'm warning you. From the looks of her, she's probably filled with all kinds of mutations. If you screw her, your dick will probably rot off inside!"

Cloudhawk was dragged away by the mercenaries. As for the woman, she just sat there with her rotting baby in her arms, not moving at all. It was as though she herself was nothing more than a corpse waiting to rot away. As for the passing travelers, few of them spared her a glance. Most of them had long since grown accustomed to such sights.

Cloudhawk began to grow confused. Weren't all excavators supposed to be able to dress in warm clothes, eat warm bread, and drink clean water? Why was this

completely different from what he had imagined?!

It was like a pail of icy water had been thrown over his excitement and anticipation. It was like a child eagerly unwrapping a present, only to find a pile of shit inside.

The outpost had quite a few crude shop stalls. However, there was no money here; the system was purely operated on the basis of bartering, with food, bullets, and fuel being the most commonly used instruments of trade.

Next to them was a small inn, not quite thirty square meters in size, which was filled with murky smoke. A young, lithe, and completely nude woman was standing atop a stage, writhing about undulously under the dim lighting. Her rear was so perky, quite a few of the men nearby wanted to step up and give it a hard squeeze.

“Slaaaaves! Slaves for sale!”

Up ahead was a fierce-faced slave trader standing atop a dais, spittle flying from his mouth as he extolled his products… three women and two men.

“They are absolutely clean, guaranteed. No sicknesses, no mutations. You can bring the women and keep them in your private collection. They have firm tits and perky asses. I guarantee they are worth the money!

“The men are strong and muscular. They’ll be good workers. If you spend a bit of time and effort on them, they’ll be strong gladiators as well. They might even win you some money in the gladiator pits. Don’t miss out!”

The three women and two men allowed others to touch and squeeze them as they pleased. They didn’t have looks of despair or pain on their faces; instead, they smiled in a pandering fashion, hoping that they would find a good master who would treat them well.

A wind blew through a nearby alleyway, bringing with it the stench of rotting corpses. Every day, one or two people would die within these side alleys and hidden corners. There was nothing strange about this.

Smokes, wine, women… lust, violence, corruption… these were the main themes of this place, and the smell of decadence and moral decay filled every inch of it.

Men traded their lives. Women traded their flesh.

Heaven for the strong. Hell for the weak.

Cloudhawk was beginning to understand what Slyfox had said to him.

In the center of the outpost there was an erect stone stele, as well as a few rules that seemed to have been written with blood. The stone stele only described what the rules were, not what the punishments were… but the burnt and blackened stakes next to them quietly explained it all! Every single stake had badly burnt corpses that were tied to them using steel chains. In the outpost, there was just one type of punishment – execution by fire!

"See that?" Slyfox pointed as he spoke. "That place up ahead is the private residence of the outpost commander. I'm warning you right now – stay the hell away from that place. They'll crush you as easily as a cockroach, and would care less!"

The towering building Slyfox was pointing to could be seen from the outpost gates, as prominent as a crane within a flock of chickens. Electric lights could be seen illuminating the rooms within the building. Electricity… this was an extremely precious and rare commodity. There were very few scavengers in the wastelands who were lucky enough to excavate a power generator of the Old Times or who had the skills to create one. Only a very, very elite few were able to make use of this precious resource.

So this was the commander's residence?

Cloudhawk couldn't help but fantasize about what was inside. What sort of three-headed, six-armed freak could possibly be so powerful as to control and command an outpost like this? Be so mighty as to ensure that even fierce fellows like Slyfox and Mad Dog would have no choice but to comply, not daring to revolt?

"You came at just the right time." Slyfox stared at the words on the stone stele, then sighed. "A year ago, Blackflag Outpost was ten times as chaotic as it is now. You'd see rape and murder out in the open, and both the slave traders and 'meat merchants' hunted and grabbed people with impunity. Ever since the new commander arrived, things have taken a turn for the better. She personally wrote all the words on this stone stele."

"New commander? What happened to the old one?"

"Whaddya think?" Slyfox looked at Cloudhawk as if he were an idiot. "Killed, of course!

There's no such thing as a permanent commander. Every so often, an old commander will be killed, and the killer will become the new commander. Eventually, he'll be killed and replaced as well. People always follow the strong. If you think you are tough enough, you can go and challenge the commander as well!"

Slyfox and Mad Dog were tough, but they were still nothing more than mercenaries. They relied on the outpost to provide them with the information and missions they needed to earn their commissions and feed themselves. They would never dare to disobey the commander or to try to take that position for themselves. As for Cloudhawk, he wouldn't even dare to imagine such a thing!

A raucous commotion could be heard coming from up ahead. More than ten men who were dressed like outpost guards and who wore breathing masks were working together to drag an enormous corpse forwards.

Amazingly enough, they were actually dragging a long, strange beast that was roughly half a meter thick. Its sticky skin was emanating a mucous-like fluid that instantly drenched the ground beneath it, causing a series of corrosive sizzling sounds that caused Cloudhawk's blood to run cold.

Although the beast was only half a meter thick, it was roughly ten meters long. Not too far away from the soldiers was an area where the ground seemed to have been churned. There was also an opening in the ground which was roughly half a meter in diameter. The surrounding area was covered with that mucous-like fluid, and there were a number of corpses on the ground as well. Those corpses had all been heavily corroded to the point where they looked as though they were made of melting wax.

"Oh, fuck, another giant earthworm? For fuck's sake, that's the second one this month!"

Cloudhawk had never seen such a terrifying creature before. "W-what is that?!"

Slyfox shook his head. "When you have this many people gathered together in an outpost… if I was a mutabeast, I'd choose this place as my hunting grounds as well. Still, for a few to appear every so often is nothing. The real thing you have to worry about is mutabeasts waves. That's what ends up wrecking most outposts."

"Hah. Relaaaax. Nothing to be scared of." One of the veteran mercenaries patted Cloudhawk on the shoulders. "You'll get used to it, if you live long enough."

When the outpost soldiers dragged the terrifying corpse through the streets, the nearby passersby all parted ways without even glancing at them. Were they really able to get used to such things?

Cloudhawk suddenly felt as though he was walking on thorns. Every single step he took made him feel extremely uncomfortable.

Chapter 9
The Mercenary Base

he base of the Tartarus mercenaries was a stand-alone compound protected by stone walls and iron barbed wire. The grounds were littered with boulders, pillars, sandbags, wooden rakes, and other training equipment. Many different pieces of metallic parts and other miscellaneous items were also spread throughout the area.

The compound had several large, ragged-looking buildings that were all connected to each other. There was a dormitory, a repair shop, and even a storage vault. Although they all looked quite ugly, nobody in the wastelands gave a damn about appearances. Just having these things was already incredibly impressive!

Judging from their base, these mercenaries truly did have some standing here. That meant this should be a fairly safe place, right?

Just as this thought entered Cloudhawk's mind, a savage and ferocious black figure suddenly roared and charged straight towards him. It moved with incredible speed! It was so fast that Cloudhawk wasn't even able to see the creature clearly. All Cloudhawk could tell was that it looked like an enormous beast. The creature knocked Cloudhawk to the ground, towering over him. The creature emanated a horrifying, nauseating stench, and it began to bite downwards towards Cloudhawk's neck with its long, savage teeth.

"WOOLA!" Mad Dog immediately let out an explosive shout. "STOP THAT!"

The crazy beast halted its assault, baring its teeth and growling before it took a few steps back. Its dark-red eyes, however, continued to stare at Cloudhawk unblinkingly. The creature remained in a crouched attacking position, as though it was unwilling to just let go of this delectable prey.

"Fuck me. Which sonufabitch let Woola out? Get the rope!" Mad Dog let out a loud shout, while Cloudhawk managed to calm down slightly as he clambered to his feet.

This was a strange creature which looked like a big ape. It had to weigh at least sixty or seventy kilograms, and its head was three times larger than that of a normal human

being's. It had a big nose and a big mouth that stretched all the way back to its ears, seeming to split its head in half when it snarled. Its mouth was filled with sharp, shark-like teeth; there had to be at least three or four rows of teeth! It could probably bite through metal armor without any problems at all. Flesh and bone was even less of an issue!

The creature had a total of six thick and powerful arms. As for its speed? Cloudhawk had just borne witness to it personally; it most likely moved faster than the majority of creatures in the wastelands.

Why would the mercenaries have such a strange beast in their headquarters?

"Don't worry. We've been raising Woola here in the compound. It has a very sharp nose, and whenever someone it doesn't recognize tries to barge in, it'll deal with the trespasser the same way it just dealt with you. It's been fed on man-meat ever since it was young. It'd gnaw all the flesh off your bones in just a few minutes." Mad Dog personally held the creature back and started to tie him up again. The creature shook its large head repeatedly in an unhappy manner, but even it was unable to resist Mad Dog's strange, frightening strength. "Be a good boy, Woola. Later, I'll go to the black market and get you your favorite snack; a human leg!"

The creature had eyes, a mouth, a nose, and even fingers. Although it was incredibly twisted-looking and ugly, Cloudhawk had the strange feeling that this creature… was actually some sort of highly mutated human being!

A strange look on his face, Cloudhawk asked, "What the hell is it?"

"You've probably guessed already. This here is a mutant. Its parents might've been normal humans like us, but it underwent heavy mutations in its mother's womb. From what I heard, it chewed its way through its mother's guts and belly, then clawed its way out," Mad Dog began to explain. "It was captured shortly after it was born, and we've raised it and trained it like a dog ever since. Critter's actually a perfect watchdog for our base!"

Cloudhawk could hardly believe it. He didn't want to believe it. You could actually train a mutant the way you would a dog?! But it was true that this 'Woola' creature really could no longer be considered a human being either.

Still, because it was once a human being, Woola was still more clever than ordinary

animals. At the very least, it could understand the human language and human speech. And yet, it was even more savage and bloodthirsty than most animals. In short, it was an absolutely terrifying freak of nature!

This entire time, Woola's gaze never left Cloudhawk's face. Drops of saliva continuously dripped out of its mouth, causing Cloudhawk to shiver with fear. He could sense the animosity and hostility radiating from the freak's eyes.

"Hey, boss-men Mad Dog and Slyfox! Y'all came back already?" The entire mercenary group had roughly twenty or thirty people, and most of them had arrived by now. The mercenary group was divided into a total of three squads, and two of the squad captains were Slyfox and Mad Dog.

The third captain was a tall and skinny Asian. He had a pallid complexion, dark baggy eyes, and wore a pair of spectacles. On the surface, he looked quite calm and weak, and he was dressed in very proper-looking clothes that didn't seem all that remarkable. And yet… in this day and age, to seemed completely ordinary and normal was, in and of itself, extremely abnormal. In fact, it could be said that he had a scholarly aura which was completely different from that of this era.

"Hey, Mantis!" Slyfox chortled as he walked over to the man. "Man, I'm happy to make it back in one piece and see you again."

Mantis adjusted his glasses, a frigid metallic light gleaming from them. His eyes weren't that large, but they were as cold as steel and seemed to contain no human emotions whatsoever. When Mantis turned to stare at Cloudhawk, the latter instantly felt a chill enter his heart and spread out through his limbs. He felt as though he could barely move or breathe.

The gaze was like a sharp scalpel that had been placed against his throat. The slightest motion would result in his throat being cut.

In this place, everyone who had a nickname was a figure of no small ability. Mantis might not necessarily be as powerful as Slyfox or Mad Dog, but Cloudhawk had the feeling that he was even more dangerous. It was like the difference between a cobra and a lion; the cobra might not be as strong as the lion, but a cobra hidden in the darkness could be even more dangerous than the lion.

"We picked up a scav on our way back." Slyfox beamed at Mantis, his chubby face an

amusing, complete contrast to Mantis' emotionless expression. Slyfox then added, "He's a recovery-oriented meta. Not really worth a damn, but we're lacking in the logistics department so I let'm in."

A recovery meta? Those were almost useless! The mercenaries turned their scornful gazes upon Cloudhawk, making him feel extremely uncomfortable and also irritated. What gave them the right to look down on him like that? Were recovery metas really as useless as they were claiming? Ever since he was born, Cloudhawk had always been a stubborn person who never liked to admit inferiority to others. He simply couldn't stand being looked down upon by these people.

"Enough, kid. You should be leaping for joy at having been recruited into Tartarus. We have a sterling reputation in this outpost… but lemme make it clear to you right now, you aren't here to just loaf around and enjoy life! Starting today, you'll only be given two pieces of bread and one bottle of water each day. In exchange, you do whatever the hell we tell you to do. No whining and no foot-dragging. Can't handle it? Then fuck off. Tartarus ain't charity! Got it?"

Cloudhawk relaxed his clenched fists. "Got it."

Slyfox had an excited look on his face as he said, "We made out like bandits on this mission. We need to hold a celebration!"

"HAH!"

"Long live the boss!"

These men were like beasts; they lived off of their weapons and the blood of others. No one ever knew what the morrow might bring, and so they had long since grown accustomed to enjoying today.

Cloudhawk had no idea as to how mercenaries celebrated, but he was both hungry and thirsty. All he hoped for was some food to eat.

The skies slowly began to darken. By now, the mercenaries had produced a large amount of food and cheap wine. The quality of life in the outpost really was thousands of times better than life in the ruins, at least in terms of food. The mercenaries had access to both meat and vegetables! The meat came from all kinds of mutabeasts, was served on platters, and had actually been cooked properly. Cloudhawk was able to smell their enticing aroma from far away.

By now, Woola had been tied up. One of the mercenaries came over with a giant bowl filled with chopped up bits of raw, bloody meat. Woola immediately dug into the meat, devouring it with abandon. The mutant even chewed up and crunched the bones, swallowing everything. As for what type of creature the meat came from and what body parts were involved? Cloudhawk simply couldn't even begin to imagine the answer. Unfortunately, Woola continued to stare intently at Cloudhawk even as it continued to devour its food. Cloudhawk was terrified of moving closer to Woola, for fear of being pounced on and killed on the spot.

Damn that beast!

Woola sniffed the air a few times with its large black nose, then suddenly stopped eating as it raised its head and began to roar gutterally. Right at this moment, nearly twenty or so scantily-clad women came in from outside. Although all of them had coarse skin and sickly faces, they were indeed far better than the streetwalkers Cloudhawk had seen earlier.

"Boys!" Mad Dog lifted his glass up high. "Have fun tonight!"

The mercenaries let out lusty cries that almost sounded like the howling of wolves, then began to drag the women over in a rather brutish manner. To these women, being able to eat and drink was like manna falling from the heavens! As for Woola, the creature seemed to be very uncomfortable with so many strangers being present, and so it continued to roar and bark nonstop. This did not, however, put a damper in the moods of the mercenaries, and they quickly began to act with fearless licentiousness.

Seeing that Woola was no longer staring at him, Cloudhawk immediately circled around the creature and went to grab some food for himself.

"Hey newbie! None of this is for you!"

"Fuggoff, yeah?"

The Tartarus mercenaries didn't operate a charity; everyone was rewarded or punished in accordance with their deeds. Cloudhawk was not only a newbie, he was a newbie no one gave a shit about. This naturally meant he had no right to enjoy the food alongside them.

"Two pieces of bread and one bottle of water. That's all you get!" Slyfox gestured towards someone. "Hey, you! What's your face? Yeah, get over here. Find a place for

the newbie to stay. The base is full."

He wasn't even going to be allowed to live with the other mercenaries?

Cloudhawk was issued a shortsword and a few candles, then led to a tattered room nearby and told to stay there. This small room was filled with dust and mold. Those tiny candles flickered and sputtered in the dark night wind, a clear reflection of the kid's own mood. He sat there in the ugly room, rather confused and rather uncomfortable.

It was now rather frighteningly quiet outside. This room was roughly two hundred meters away from the mercenary base. If anything was to happen, would the mercenaries be able to make it in time? Would they even care to? Who knew! The only thing Cloudhawk knew for certain was that these mercenaries viewed him as an expendable newbie.

Cloudhawk finished the remainder of his rock-hard bread, then drank all of his water. He checked to make sure the beam across his door was set, then picked up the shortsword the mercenaries had given him and placed it by the side of his bed. He then gently blew out the candles, plunging the entire room into darkness.

Cloudhawk lay down upon his straw bed. The straw poked at his skin and was rather uncomfortable, but at least it was fairly warm.

Was this how life would be for him in the future? Cloudhawk felt both nervous and lost. He had no plans, no goals anymore. He had no idea what he was going to do tomorrow, nor did he know what the future would be like.

Cloudhawk shook his head furiously as he mentally consoled himself, "What else do you want? You not only have bread and water every day, you even have a place to stay. What do you have to complain about?"

Although things here weren't exactly as he had envisioned them to be, it was still much better than life as a scavenger… right? No point in over-thinking things. Staying alive and living a good life was what mattered!

Chapter 10
The Night of Death

Cloudhawk's sleep was not a restful one again. In his dreams, he once more returned to that tunnel which led to hell. The area around him was littered in body parts and severed limbs, and the blood-soaked bodies on the ground were all twitching. The massacred scavengers all began to rise to their feet. Some of them had acid-eaten faces that had been rendered unrecognizable, while others had their heads partially caved in from stone warhammer blows. Others had actually been bisected! All of them slowly began to gather together and swarm around Cloudhawk like angry, vengeful specters.

No. NO! Cloudhawk frantically tried to flee, but his legs seemed to be glued in place. It was as though he was stuck to the thick, congealed blood on the ground.

Right at this moment, a scavenger clutching a shortsword hobbled over in an extremely ungainly manner. His right leg had been cut off, while a terrifying, gaping wound was on his neck. The wound was so deep that his head was half falling off his neck, and his eyes were filled with viperous hate. "Why didn't you save me!"

The scavenger's voice was more dreadful than the wailing of all the wraiths of hell, and he lifted up his shortsword and delivered a hacking blow. Terrified, Cloudhawk leaned sideways to dodge… and right in that moment, a spear suddenly flew over from somewhere and pierced through his chest!

The second attacker was a mutant that looked fairly young. One of his eyes had been stabbed through, leaving only one good eye remaining on his smiling, savage, and terrifying face.

Cloudhawk fell onto the ground, completely unable to move as blood surged out of him like a geyser, draining his strength away with it.

The scavengers and the sweepers all disappeared. Moments later, a chubby white man and a muscular black man led a group of chatting and laughing mercenaries over. They didn't seem to even see the youth who was fighting for his life on the ground.

Cloudhawk reached out towards them. "Save me!"

Their gazes were filled with disdain. “Useless piece of crap.”

A mercenary hawked and spat, a look of disdain on his face. It was as though he had stepped onto a pile of excrement and wanted to give vent to his annoyance. All of the mercenaries cursed as they moved to circle around Cloudhawk.

Cloudhawk just lay there on the ground, powerless. His eyes slowly began to turn blank as he felt his body growing colder and colder. He wanted to reach out and grab something, anything, but his determination and his will were both slipping away from him. It was a terrifying feeling, a feeling of utter despair.

His body became ice cold, then started to decay and emanate an aura of foulness. Countless bugs and worms began to bore through his corpse, which eventually became a feast for rats.

But even when nothing was left of Cloudhawk besides a skeleton, his will and his mind remained intact. Endless despair and grief filled every single bone, surrounding his corpse as it sank deeper and deeper into an endless darkness…

Creak! Creaaak!

Cloudhawk was suddenly able to make out a vague sound. It was like a bucket of cold water had been poured over him, and he was instantly jolted awake from that terrifying nightmare.

His entire body was covered with cold sweat. He had died such a miserable, meaningless death. That feeling of utter despair, of slipping into that eternal darkness… that sorrowful feeling of utter powerlessness… even now, his heart was pounding. What a terrifying nightmare that had been!

It was not yet dawn. The night was so dark, everything seemed to blur together. The entire outpost had been securely locked down, and everything was so stiflingly silent that he felt as though he could barely breathe.

Creak. Creaaak!

That sound rang out again. It was a tiny, almost unnoticeable sound that nonetheless stabbed against his psyche like a dagger. It was this very sound which had startled Cloudhawk awake, and at this moment goosebumps began to appear throughout his body once more. He could sense that danger was enveloping him!

Something had appeared in the cracks of the bolted door, something which sparkled with cold metallic light within the darkness. It was the thin edge of a knife!

The knife slowly, silently extended its way through the seams of the door, then slid upwards until it hit the wooden bolt. The knife stayed there for two brief seconds, then slowly began to rise upwards once more and lift the bolt up.

Was it one of the mercenaries? No way! Why would one of them come at a time like this and use such a stealthy method to open the door?

Cloudhawk's heart was pounding so hard, he felt as though it was about to burst out of his chest. He hastily gripped the shortsword lying next to the bed, his hand still slick with cold sweat from the nightmare. He hid the shortsword underneath him, then curled around it.

He breathed deeply, forcing himself to relax. His muscles however remained taut, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

This midnight intruder was clearly quite practiced in his movements. His knife easily lifted the wooden bolt up without causing much sound at all. He pushed the door open by just a crack, but did not immediately charge inside.

This was an extremely experienced predator! Without a doubt, he was currently scanning the insides of the room to assess the situation.

Cloudhawk didn't want to expose the fact that he was awake, and so he just lay there on the bed without moving, maintaining an even breathing pattern as though he was still asleep.

After four or five moments of silence, a long blade reached through the crack and pushed the door open, letting in the moonlight from the outside. This midnight trespasser was fairly tall and muscular, and he had a head full of tousled hair. He held a knife in his left hand while he gripped a long machete in his right. The blade of the machete seemed to be covered with many dark-red splotches, and it radiated a faint but sickening stench of blood. The machete's edge was extremely sharp, and it flashed with a cold light that warned of impending danger and death.

He's here to kill me! Cloudhawk's mind was in a state of chaos right now. He was filled with horror, fear, rage, but mostly confusion. *Oh, fuck. Who is this guy? This is my first day in the outpost. Why did someone choose to attack me like this?*

Cloudhawk's keen sense for danger was screaming to him that this midnight trespasser was a dangerous man. If he tried to battle the man head-on, he'd probably fail. He had to seize a chance to counter and kill the man.

Five meters. Four meters. Three meters…

The midnight trespasser walked as silently as a cat, causing no sound at all as he slowly, steadily inched his way forwards. He slowly, steadily raised his right arm up high, then brought his machete downwards in a vicious chop that flashed through the darkness of the night. This entire time, he didn't display even the slightest hint of anger or hatred. It was as though he was chopping down at a wooden puppet rather than a human being.

Whoosh! Cloudhawk instantly rolled sideways, letting the machete nearly nick his face as it hacked into his bed. If he had been just a second slower, it would've been his head! Cloudhawk then launched himself off his bed with his two legs, bursting forth with all of his strength!

Faced with Cloudhawk's sudden spring-assault, the man didn't hesitate for even a second. He decisively let go of his machete, then managed to dodge Cloudhawk's sudden attack with almost supernatural agility. In the exact same instant that he dodged, he sent the knife in his right hand towards Cloudhawk, flashing like a streak of cold light.

He was simply much too fast! Not only was he an experienced hunter, he was also an experienced killer. His strength, his speed, his agility, his response time, his combat experience, his mental toughness… all of these things had clearly been honed through long experience. How could a half-grown kid who grew up in the ruins on garbage possibly be a match for him? Cloudhawk knew from the minute he missed his attack that he was finished.

That cold streak of light moved straight towards Cloudhawk's throat. There was no wasted motion, no flowery flourishes; it was a strike that was both fast and vicious, and also incredibly accurate. The knife was sharp enough to easily tear through skin and flesh alike, then saw through his arteries as easily as sawing through noodles.

Cloudhawk felt as though everything was beginning to move in slow motion!

Although he had faced death on numerous occasions in the past, each time he had

been in a state of utter terror and panic. He had never faced death with such alertness and mental clarity as he was now. He could literally see death coming for him but was unable to do anything about it at all.

He had finally been able to escape his status as a lowly scavenger and the ruins. He hadn't yet had the chance to grow strong, to gain freedom and independence, to take control over his own destiny. Was it going to be like the dream? Was he really going to die a meaningless and despair-filled death?

No. He couldn't die! Not like this!

Cloudhawk let out a bestial growl, a growl filled with untamed wildness and rage. A powerful desire to stay alive burst forth from his breast, and as it did it seemed to form a resonance with something else in his chest. Instantly, a surge of fiery strength and frenzied determination filled his entire body, almost as though some invisible power was lending Cloudhawk a hand. With it, Cloudhawk dodged the incoming knife with preternatural agility, suffering just a slight nick in the skin that left only the tiniest of marks.

The trespasser was rendered speechless. How did his target, this kid, suddenly seem to transform into someone else entirely? However, he remained a calm, composed, and highly experienced hunter; he was able to compartmentalize his surprise and prevent it from affecting his movements. His knife didn't pause at all, and in his hands it seemed like a living thing as it curved backwards and snaked out a beautiful but deadly butterfly-strike that flashed in the dark night.

It didn't matter how agile or nimble his prey was. In the end, it was nothing more than a weak little kid! These few brief exchanges had immediately let the trespasser know just how weak Cloudhawk was, and he held the kid in no regard at all. He decided to finish things with his next attack by just cutting the kid's throat, and his movements grew faster and faster.

Just as the sharp knife was about to kiss the kid's throat… whap! A clear sound rang out, and the dancing light of the knife suddenly vanished. A deceivingly delicate hand had reached out with lightning speed, then clamped itself around the trespasser's wrist with far more speed and power than it had a right to have. The trespasser felt as though his wrist had been caught in a metal vise. He was actually unable to shake free of that skinny little hand's grip.

“You want to kill me?” The kid’s irises were completely bloodshot, making them look like the eyes of a demon. He looked completely possessed, and not a hint of anything which could be described as rational thought was apparent in his gaze!

The trespasser suddenly began to feel a hint of fear. This was no weak youth. This was a berserk animal!

“You want to KILL ME!?” The first time the youth had said these words, it had been in the form of a question. This time, it came in the form of a furious, declarative shout. The youth’s handsome face was already twisted into a mask of terrifying rage, and he suddenly tightened his grip. CRACK! The youth broke the visitor’s wrist.

The trespasser let out an agonized howl, but it only lasted for half a second. In the same instant that Cloudhawk broke the trespasser’s wrist, he stabbed out with his shortsword at several times his previous speed and with ten times his previous savagery. The blade of the shortsword tore into the trespasser’s skin then dug into his lungs. It felt as though a block of ice had penetrated the trespasser’s body, causing it to instantly turn as cold as ice.

Cloudhawk immediately pulled the shortsword out, and as he did so he tore through a beating, pulsating organ. When the sword came out, with it came the hunter’s blood, vitality, and strength. Cloudhawk's face was bathed in the trespasser’s spurting blood, and the blood was both warm and foul-smelling. And yet, Cloudhawk wasn’t nauseated at all; in fact, he actually felt more excitement than anything else. A single wild, frenzied thought filled every corner of his mind.

Kill him! Kill him! KILL HIM!

The shortsword was of fairly low quality. As a result, on Cloudhawk’s fifth stab it was no longer able to endure the violent force its master was applying to it, and it snapped off inside the target’s body. As for the hilt, it fell straight to the ground.

Cloudhawk’s entire body felt so hot, it was like he was being burned alive. It was like the eruption of a volcano that had been slumbering for a million years. His mind was filled with nothing save the desire to kill and destroy. He was completely unable to suppress those feelings in his heart. He wanted to bellow, to howl, to ruin and destroy everything he could see!

What is going on? What the hell is wrong with me? Cloudhawk knew that he was at the

very brink of madness. With the last bit of clarity left to him, he tore off the strange stone and tossed it to one side. As soon as the stone left him, he immediately regained his normal faculties.

There really was something wrong with that rock!

By now, Cloudhawk had a rough idea as to what was going on. Within the rock, there seemed to reside an ancient mind or an ancient will, one which had most likely been left behind by its previous master. Through methods which Cloudhawk could not understand or even imagine, the stone's former master had imprinted his own will, mind, and possibly even energy inside of that stone. The reason he had done so was to ensure that, in certain special circumstances, the stone would have a major impact on Cloudhawk's life.

This was what had happened during the previous night. That was what had happened just now as well.

The seemingly ordinary rock once more returned to its ordinary, dull appearance. It seemed to possess no extraordinary attributes at all and looked as plain as plain could be. Cloudhawk picked the stone up, focusing on it several times but still gaining no idea as to how he was supposed to use it.

Where exactly did it come from? What exactly was it? And what sort of a person had left that brutal, terrifying, and powerful will behind within the stone?

This stone was definitely an extraordinary one. Perhaps, in the future, it would once more be of assistance to him. In the end, Cloudhawk decided to keep it in his possession but also decided that he couldn't let anyone learn about it at all.

Chapter 11
Training

Dawn. Finally, the long-awaited mercenaries came looking for him.

"Motherfucker, what's he doing here? That's Skinner! I was just drinking with him the other week! Skinner's the owner of a butcher shop. Hm… his store was probably running low again, so he came out last night to try and find a few piggies to butcher to replenish his stock." Mad Dog eyed the corpse on the ground. Although they were old acquaintances, Mad Dog didn't show the slightest bit of grief or pity at all. It was as though he was looking at a dead rat that had invaded his property. "Your luck sure is shit, kid. Who would've thought something like this would happen to you on your first day? By my count, at least eighty little piggies like you have ended up dead by Skinner's hands."

The owner of a butcher shop? So this was one of those detestable meat merchants! Cloudhawk had thought them to only exist in the wastelands. Who would've thought that they would exist in the outposts as well!

"Then again, I have to say… the fucker might've been useless, but not so useless as to end up like this!" Mad Dog glanced at Cloudhawk in a very puzzled manner. "Why aren't you dead instead of him?"

And what the fuck was that supposed to mean? Is he suggesting that I shouldn't be alive? Although Cloudhawk was enraged by Mad Dog's attitude, he didn't dare reveal the truth behind what happened the previous night, and so he just gave a rather vague explanation for what had happened.

"You pretended to be asleep, then suddenly shanked the fucker in the heart?" Mad Dog thought it through carefully, then decided that it was plausible. The corpse on the ground had probably just underestimated the kid too much. "Next time, hang a bell on the door or set up a simple trap. Shit like this happens every night at Blackflag Outpost. You were lucky this time, but you might not be so lucky next time."

As soon as Mad Dog finished speaking, he turned and prepared to leave.

“Wait a sec!” Cloudhawk didn’t understand why all of this had happened. “What should I do with the corpse?"

“Your spoils of war. You decide. You can either sell it to the black market or use it yourself. I recommend you nail the head outside your door. Skinner’s head will probably scare a few people off, making it easier for you to fall asleep at night. As for the rest of his body… well, y’know, he spent most of his life skinning others and selling their meat. It’s now his own turn to be skinned eaten by someone else.”

The ugly, swarthy bastard spoke in a very matter-of-fact manner. Cloudhawk, however, revealed a look of revulsion upon hearing it.

“You really are a damn rookie!” Mad Dog spat disdainfully. “Check out that horrified look on your face! You probably wouldn’t even have the balls to taste human meat. Just send the corpse to Mantis or give it to Woola. They like this type of present! Enough of this crap. Next time some small-time shit like this happens, deal with it yourself instead of bothering me about it. Fuck me, what a waste of time.”

Mad Dog continued to curse and insult Cloudhawk as he left the room. At the doorway, he suddenly turned his head and said, “Come to the training area at noon. You have work to do!”

Cloudhawk silently swore Mad Dog up and down at least ten times before calming down! Still… he still had a job to carry out. Cloudhawk couldn’t help but shiver when he thought of how Woola slavered and drooled while staring at him, and so he decided it was best to send the corpse to Mantis instead. Of the three mercenary captains, Mantis seemed to be the only one who seemed normal.

First, Cloudhawk stripped the corpse of its clothes and weapons. They might be of use in the future, after all. Cloudhawk then dragged the corpse out of his room. No one on the streets reacted to him dragging a corpse around; in fact, no one even glanced a second time at him. Faced with utter indifference, Cloudhawk was actually able to relax a little bit.

Mantis resided within a large, stand-alone house which was virtually the largest building the mercenaries had. Cloudhawk couldn’t help but feel quite curious. It seemed as though Mantis never went out on missions. Why, then, did he hold such a high status amongst the mercenaries?

When the puzzled Cloudhawk entered Mantis' residence, his eyes damn near popped out. When he saw what was happening before him, for a moment he felt certain that he had to have entered the wrong place. This was no residence… it was a slaughterhouse!

Five or six corpses lay sprawled in various locations. Some had their hands lopped off, some had missing legs, and some had their skulls split open. As for Mantis, he wore a pair of gloves on his hands and was busy carving open the chest and the abdomen of one of the corpses, using a pair of sharp surgical scalpels with precision. In just a few brief moments, he drew out a bloody organ from within the chest cavity.

This sight made Cloudhawk's hair stand on end. No wonder this guy was named 'Mantis'! He suppressed his nervousness and called out, "C-C-Captain!"

No response. Mantis continued to carefully inspect the organ in his hands. When he found the unusual mutations he was searching for, he used his scalpels to cut them off bit by bit, then stored them into a small glass jar.

The surrounding area was actually filled with large jars, and the jars in turn were filled with many human organs held in preservative fluids. Others were filled with strange plant rooms, and there was also a single strange eyeball that was absolutely chilling to behold.

What was Cloudhawk supposed to do? Neither leaving nor staying seemed appropriate, but he really didn't want to stay here for a second longer than necessary.

"A fresh one?" After finishing his work on the mutated parts, Mantis turned to give the new corpse a cold glance. He had yet to so much as look at Cloudhawk himself. "Put it here," he said, clearing away a table.

Cloudhawk hurriedly lifted the corpse onto the table. "Can I leave now?"

Mantis ignored him as he briefly scanned the corpse. His experience in human anatomy told him right away that this was an agility metahuman. Agility metahumans had higher synaptic response times, giving them higher reaction speeds and greater agility than others. It also gave them a certain degree of physical strength. Humans like him would be able to move very quickly, respond very quickly, and unleash sudden bursts of power.

Mantis himself was an extremely high-class agility metahuman. The corpse before him

wasn't nearly as high-class, but there was no way an ordinary human being would've been able to handle it.

Mantis raised his head to glance at Cloudhawk, who was standing nearby like a block of wood. Mantis asked coldly, "You killed him?"

"Uh, yeah, I killed him…" Cloudhawk felt goosebumps when Mantis stared at him like this. He immediately repeated to Mantis the story he had told Mad Dog earlier. "I guess I was lucky. That's why I made it out alive."

"Is that so?" Mantis' cold gaze seemed to see straight through Cloudhawk. Of the three captains of Tartarus, Cloudhawk felt that Mantis was the most unfathomable of them all.

Cloudhawk swallowed some saliva. "Uh… if there's nothing else, I'm going to leave." But Mantis had another idea. "Stop right there." Mantis remained as taciturn as always, unwilling to say a single unnecessary word. He handed a scalpel over to Cloudhawk, then said, "Dissect him."

Cloudhawk thought that he might be hearing things. He had grown up in the wastes and so didn't fear corpses, but to personally dissect one was still a bit too much. What the hell was wrong with Mantis? What was the point of dissecting so many corpses?

As Cloudhawk hesitated, a cold, murderous intent began to radiate outwards from Mantis. Cloudhawk felt a powerful sense of danger, a sensation so strong as to make it hard for him to even breathe. This feeling was completely different from the feeling he had last night; the feeling Mantis gave him was that there was absolutely no chance he would be able to beat Mantis.

Cloudhawk had the strange feeling that if he rejected this request, Mantis would be able to instantly slit his throat using that scalpel without even giving him a chance to say a single word.

"Alright!" Cloudhawk forced himself to pick up that scalpel and other instruments, such as tweezers. He cut into the corpse in accordance with Mantis' instructions. Mantis just stood there like a frozen statue, issuing clipped and succinct orders to tell Cloudhawk what to do. Cloudhawk actually began to understand how the human body was constructed. Most likely, Mantis was training him to be able to help out better in the future.

A few hours later, Cloudhawk was finally permitted to leave, and he fled from Mantis' workroom as though his life depended on it. This morning had been an absolute nightmare!

Fuck. That freak. That pervert! That skin-peeling, flesh-cutting… urgh! Cloudhawk had a strong feeling of nausea. Several minutes passed before he was able to recover. Now… he finally understood that none of the three captains were 'normal'.

Uh oh. He suddenly realized that he had almost forgotten the orders which Mad Dog had given him. Mad Dog was a brutally bad-tempered man. If Cloudhawk pissed him off, he'd snap Cloudhawk's legs without even blinking. Cloudhawk wouldn't dare to ignore his orders, and so he immediately ran towards the training area. This was the place where the Tartarus mercenaries spent their time training, and as soon as Cloudhawk entered he heard Woola's frenzied baying.

The 'mutt' had been tied to the entrance way, and his ugly, savage gaze was once more fixed upon Cloudhawk. Bloody spots could be seen surrounding his jaws, as though he had just enjoyed a 'feast' not too long ago.

"What the hell took you so long?" Mad Dog had a seriously pissed off look in his eyes, but he turned and snapped to the training mercenaries, "Enough! Get over here. Your sparring partner has just arrived!"

Sparring partner? What the hell did that mean?

"Listen up! This kid is a recovery meta, but he's a fairly crappy one. Don't hit him too hard and don't cripple him!" Mad Dog didn't give Cloudhawk any explanations at all as he pointed to one of the mercenaries. "Cook, you go first!"

The mercenary named Cook was a man that looked as muscular as a grizzly bear. He immediately walked out with an excited look on his face as he eyed Cloudhawk with a judging gaze. "Boss, you guys are absolutely brilliant. You knew how bored we were hitting sandbags, so you found us a meat-bag to hit instead. Hitting someone who can dodge and scream is a helluva lot more fun!"

Cloudhawk was starting to have a bad feeling about this. But before he could say anything, Mad Dog just said impatiently, "Cut the fucking crap and start already!"

Just as Cloudhawk was about to protest, Cook charged towards him while delivering an elbow strike that knocked Cloudhawk to the ground. Cloudhawk instantly felt

dazed, and his body felt like a glass bottle that had just shattered into a thousand pieces.

"Oh, fuck me!" Mad Dog began to curse loudly as his ugly, scar-covered face twisted with rage. Spittle flew from his mouth as he howled, "Can you BE any more fucking useless? Stand up!"

"Stand up! Stand up!" All the other mercenaries chanted these words towards him as well!

Finally, Cloudhawk knew what being a 'meat-bag' meant, and he also finally realized the real reason behind Slyfox's decision to recruit him into their base. Once again, that despicable fatso had deceived him!

Right at this moment, Cook delivered a furious kick right towards him. This time, Cloudhawk slanted his body sideways and managed to dodge. Mad Dog narrowed his eyes upon seeing this. Huh. That was odd. Since when did the kid's reaction time improve that much?

Cloudhawk himself had also realized that after what had happened the previous night, his reaction speed and his strength both had seemed to improved. This was probably something caused by that stone, and it wasn't the right time to let others know about his improvement. When Cook attacked with a blow from his knee, Cloudhawk elected not to dodge and instead used his hands to block it. Bang! He was sent flying into the air as though he really was nothing more than a sand bag.

Mad Dog spat on the ground, then shook his head disdainfully as he watched Cook beat down on Cloudhawk for ten full minutes. Cloudhawk didn't launch so much as a single counter-attack; instead, he just used his arms to protect his vital areas. The mercenaries were actually all quite surprised. The kid looked scrawny and weak, but his body was pretty tough. No matter how hard Cook hit him, he was still able to crawl back up.

"Cook, you move too slow and your blows aren't concentrated enough. You are a strength meta, but you hit like a little bitch! You really are fucking useless!" Mad Dog cursed him out, then snapped, "Just fuck off. NEXT!"

Cook couldn't help but mumble unhappily to himself. Although he wasn't as freakishly strong as Mad Dog, he was still able to easily snap an opponent's bones with a single

punch. He didn't use his full strength because he wasn't supposed to break the newbie, right?

Cloudhawk ended up being utterly and ruthlessly dominated for an entire afternoon. Hours passed before the mercenary training finally came to an end.

Cloudhawk went forward, claiming his ration of bread for the day. When Slyfox saw Cloudhawk's black eyes and bruised face, he roared with laughter and patted Cloudhawk on the shoulders. "Not bad, kid! You didn't disappoint me after all. Your body is pretty tough and can take a beating. Here, have an extra half-piece of bread. Keep up the good work tomorrow! Oh, right – later tonight, I'll teach you how to repair our car and how to maintain our weapons. Feeding Woola is part of your job as well. In the future, you will be responsible for all of these tasks."

Cloudhawk was really starting to regret coming here. This fat bastard, Slyfox, really had chosen the perfect nickname for himself. He swindled others without even blinking or blushing! He had first chosen for Cloudhawk to serve as live bait; now, he was using Cloudhawk as a human punching bag. Was there no low to which this bastard wouldn't stoop? If Cloudhawk had known that life in the outpost would be like this, he would've chosen to continue foraging for survival in the ruins instead.

"That look in your eyes suggests that you are quite unhappy." Slyfox took a puff on his cigarette, then put on a worldly air as he said, "Listen, young man. Learning how to take a punch is training, y'know? All metas have to continuously improve and grow stronger. Strength metas need to train in strength, agility metas need to train their agility, control metas will train in control, and recovery metas like you have to train your recovery abilities, right? Me having them beat the piss out of you is my way of showing how much I care. This 'torture' you are going through is just training. Value this opportunity. When the time comes, I promise I'll take you out on a mission with us!"

You still think I'll trust you in the future? Just fuck off and die already! Cloudhawk really wanted to punch the man in his fat face. Go out on missions? Fuck that! Cloudhawk had nearly died due to Slyfox's machinations on the last mission. Even if Slyfox really did take him out on a mission, there was no way it would be with anything even resembling good intentions!

Cloudhawk just grabbed the bread, then turned and left without saying a word. Slyfox just grinned as he watched Coudhawk leave, continuing to puff on his cigarette. "Kid's

got a bit of an attitude after all. Ahahaha!"

When night descended, Cloudhawk's entire body was drenched in machine oil as well as a claw-mark left behind by Woola. Finally, he made it back to his own residence. Only then did he realize that none of the blood had been washed off, and it had all congealed on the ground, filling the air in the room with a breathtaking stench.

Cloudhawk was both tired and hungry. He was in no mood to do any cleaning, and so he just fell onto his bed and immediately passed out.

Chapter 12
Life in the Base

There would always be differences between ‘fantasy’ and ‘reality’. Many people would often pursue their dreams with the utmost of vigor, only to find when they actually realized those dreams that they weren’t everything they had been cracked up to be. This was because the best parts of those dreams all stemmed from the human imagination itself.

Cloudhawk now truly understood the meaning behind that saying. Diggers were able to eat well, dress warmly, had places to stay, and didn’t have to live in fear, right? That was what Cloudhawk once believed, but upon actually entering the outpost he realized that excavators didn’t live easier lives than scavengers at all!

Each day, when they opened their eyes, they would celebrate the fact that they had survived yet another night. No one had slit their throats while they were dreaming! They would then begin to carry out their weary tasks, with some of them being assigned to act as ‘sparring partners’, also known as human punching bags. They also had an endless supply of miscellaneous tasks to carry out. Cloudhawk had to serve as Mantis’ helper, feed Woola, repair their tools, and engage in other types of hard labor as well.

One could imagine how miserable life like this was!

The mercenaries were all highly experienced experts, and under their tender ministrations Cloudhawk’s face became perpetually bruised and swollen. Thankfully, his fairly strong recovery abilities meant that so long as the injuries weren’t too serious, he’d be able to recover from most of the wounds after a good night’s rest. Alas, the next day the beatings would continue.

As time went on, Cloudhawk discovered a secret about himself. His speed, agility, and control seemed to be improving every single day. Although the rate at which they were improving wasn’t that fast, he really was growing stronger by the day. This fact alone was enough to surprise and delight Cloudhawk. This meant that the power he had absorbed wasn’t just a recovery power. It meant that the abilities ignited within him had vastly exceeded his expectations… and that he wouldn’t just be a useless punching

bag for the rest of his life!

This transformation was most likely the result of that mysterious stone. Alas, no matter what Cloudhawk tried, the rock remained a completely inert rock that didn't respond to anything at all. Cloudhawk had no choice but to once more wear it around his neck, keeping it with him at all times in the hopes that he would find a way to actively use the stone in the future.

Day by day, night by night, Cloudhawk gradually grew accustomed to this tough, toilsome life in Blackflag Outpost. And to be honest, being treated as a punching bag every day wasn't completely without benefits. Just as the fat Slyfox had said, as he repeatedly recovered from his injuries his recovery abilities began to improve dramatically as well. The more beatings his body took, the tougher it actually became.

In addition, Cloudhawk became more and more familiar with the techniques and tricks the mercenaries used when attacking, and he could also sense that his own speed and reaction times were improving. During the last few sessions, he had been itching to give the mercenaries a good tussle. In the end, he had still chosen to hold back, unwilling to reveal his current abilities without a good reason.

For now, he didn't want anyone to know about his secret. Neither Slyfox nor Mad Dog were reliable, after all!

Being a sparring partner was just part of his life. The mercenaries were determined to squeeze every last drop of value out of him, and as the lowest ranking member of Tartarus it was his job to fetch water, carry dishes, sweep the ground, wash their clothes, empty the chamber pots, sharpen their weapons, carry heavy loads, perform maintenance on their vehicle… he did everything.

Mantis often had Cloudhawk come to him and be his assistant. At first, Cloudhawk found this job to be extremely uncomfortable. By now, he understood the human body like the back of his head, and was able to dissect a body and draw out its internal organs with his eyes closed. As for his relationship with Woola? At first, Woola would chase him around and attempt to bite him every time Woola saw him. Now, after feeding Woola for so long, the relationship between Cloudhawk and Woola slowly became more peaceful.

Over the course of this month, Cloudhawk slowly became a real member of this organization. The other mercenaries were starting to actually like the kid. He was

stubborn and pugnacious, and every day he did his job in a very sulky manner… but he still did what he was supposed to do, and did it well. With him around, everyone in the mercenary company was able to relax much more than before. Where would they ever find another 'slave laborer' like this?

Although Cloudhawk still didn't have much status in Tartarus and wasn't allowed to eat with the others, and although he still had to live outside in that small room, everyone's attitude towards him had noticeably improved. They no longer treated him with the same contempt as they had in the past.

Every day, Cloudhawk endured beatings from the mercenaries, endured Woola chasing him around the yard and biting him, and endured all the dirty jobs which had been foisted upon him. He was someone who had grown up in the ruins. Life there had given him a tenacious, unyielding spirit. He was being treated in a way which no normal person could possibly endure, and he would bitch and moan about it every day… but he was also able to grit his teeth and bear it.

There was just one thing he couldn't endure any longer. Hunger! He was starving! Cloudhawk was beginning to realize that as his body was slowly getting stronger, his need for food was beginning to increase as well.

As for that damnable, stingy Slyfox, he hadn't improved Cloudhawk's living conditions at all. Those two or three pieces of bread Cloudhawk was given each day was simply not enough to fill his stomach; all Cloudhawk could do was occasionally scarf down some of the scraps left behind by the other mercenaries. However, that was quite rare. What was much more common was Cloudhawk being ordered around by the three captains while on an empty stomach.

This sort of life went on for a full month. One could imagine how sour Cloudhawk felt about it all! If it hadn't been for the ten-plus years of life in the ruins teaching him tenacity and patience, Cloudhawk would've blown a gasket and left long ago!

Cloudhawk knew that he couldn't leave yet. Although life in Blackflag Outpost was tough, at least it was comparatively regimented and secure!

……

For once, he was fairly free this afternoon. Cloudhawk's only assignment was to clean Woola's kennel; in other words, to sweep away Woola's dung. While working, he

pinched his nose in disgust as he said, “Can you stop shitting in the kennel? That’s so disgusting!”

Woola had been relaxing off to one side, soaking in some sun. Upon hearing Cloudhawk dare to lecture him, Woola sat up and flexed all six limbs, then stared at Cloudhawk’s behind with his red, ape-like eyes. Woola bared his teeth and let out a growl, as though he was about to charge forwards and give Cloudhawk a bite.

“Alright, alright! Just pretend I didn’t say anything.” Cloudhawk’s butt clenched involuntarily. He really was afraid of this irascible creature, who had caused him no small amount of pain in recent days. Woola was actually a bit more powerful in combat than most of the mercenaries, and was probably second to only the three captains themselves. Although he wasn’t that intelligent, he was easily enraged. He wasn’t someone you wanted to piss off.

“You can shit where you like, m’lord.”

Woola let out a burp, then once more lay down to enjoy the sun.

Just as Cloudhawk dumped the disgusting sack of dung into their garbage pile, he suddenly felt his head grow dizzy as his stomach clenched hard. That omnipresent sense of hunger suddenly began to make itself known once more, and Cloudhawk felt as though every single cell in his body was crying out for sustenance and drawing as much energy as it could from him.

This was a simply indescribable form of torment. Although scavengers were very good at enduring hunger, Cloudhawk’s body had slowly improved to the point where the hunger pains were now ten times worse than they had been before.

Cloudhawk licked his parched lips, then raised his head to stare at the clouds in the skies. His mood became complicated once more. He had risked everything to escape being a scavenger. Was it all for the sake of carrying water for others and cleaning up their dung? Did these guys want for him to be their errand boy for the rest of his life? Was his only purpose in Tartarus to be a human punching bag?

These were questions which Cloudhawk had asked himself repeatedly during this past month in Blackflag Outpost. He wanted to go out on missions like the other mercenaries, because those who went out on missions would be able to earn more food. However, all he could do was fantasize about it. In the eyes of Slyfox and the other

mercenaries, he was nothing more than a useless recovery meta, right?

Cloudhawk touched his dry, parched skin. Instead of just thinking about it, he should go ahead and do something about it. He decided it was time for him to go look for some food. There was no way he'd find anything in the mercenary base, and so his only choice was to go try his luck elsewhere. For example, maybe he would be able to dig up a few tubers or find some bugs to eat. Although he wouldn't be able to fill himself up, he'd at least be able to relieve the hunger. If he could catch a few rats, that'd be even better. It had been quite some time since he had eaten any meat.

Cloudhawk's idea wasn't a bad one. Unfortunately, it was almost guaranteed that he'd fail. Blackflag Outpost had a total of twenty thousand people, and the vast majority of them were in a state that was as bad or worse than that of the scavengers. As a result, virtually everything that was edible in the outposts had long ago been devoured by others. The most likely end result was that he'd exhaust himself looking for food, with the only reward being disappointment and even more hunger.

Cloudhawk was wandering around in a rather confused fashion, so hungry that he very nearly passed out. Right at this moment, a notice board in front of an inn suddenly attracted his attention. It read: "Recruiting temporary workers. For two hours of work, you can earn five strings of rat jerky!"

Cloudhawk's heart clenched hard as he stared at those crooked words. He could hardly believe what he was saying. Five strings of rat meat for just two hours of work? By comparison, the Tartarus mercenaries were giving him scraps fit for beggars!

Cloudhawk was rather intrigued, but he was also nervous. His past experience was warning him that nothing in the world ever came cheap. Whenever you wanted something, you would need to pay a corresponding price.

"Hey kid! You over there! Yeah, you!" Right at this moment, a man with a splotchy red nose noticed Cloudhawk's interest in the sign. The man's eyes lit up and he rose to his feet and called out, "C'mere!" Cloudhawk hesitated for a moment, then walked over.

"My name is Rednose. Heard of me?"

Cloudhawk shook his head.

"No? Wonderful!" The chubby red-nosed man let out a happy laugh that sounded warm and friendly. "You hungry, kid?"

Cloudhawk nodded.

“Need a job?”

Cloudhawk nodded again.

“Ahaha, then you came at just the right moment. The terms of the deal are pretty clear. You know how to read, right? Then I won’t waste any time repeating the terms.” As Rednose spoke, he pulled out a sheaf of wrinkly paper and put it on the table. “Just do a fingerprint here.”

Cloudhawk was so hungry that his vision was going blurry. He couldn’t clearly make out all the content on that paper, and before he had a chance to react the red-nosed man grabbed his hand and pressed it down upon the paper, leaving a fingerprint behind on it!

“You are now in my employ, starting now!” Rednose gestured to a black man standing nearby. “Take’m in!”

Cloudhawk was completely confused. He had no idea as to what was going on, but the red-nosed proprietor seemed like a fairly nice guy. It was just two hours of work, right? How bad could it possibly be? Any job was worth five strips of rat meat!

When he entered the innhouse, it was like entering a completely different world. All types of colored light were flashing before him, and hard rock music was blasting everywhere along with the screams of the crowd. Everywhere here was dancing wildly, and the air around them was filled with the scent of cheap cigarettes and even cheaper liquor.

What attracted Cloudhawk’s attention the most was the simple, ugly-looking platform located in the very center of the room.

This was a raised platform that was made out of wood and surrounded by hemp rope. It looked like a dueling ring, and the wooden floorboards of the ring were stained in blood. Right at this moment, several half-naked women were furiously scrubbing away at that blood.

Moments later, a seductive woman slowly began to walk towards the platform. Catcalls and whistles rang out from around her, and the entire area began to grow even more chaotic.

The hard rock music, alcohol, smokes, women… all of these things stimulated male hormones. Cloudhawk had never been to a place like this before. Everything around him seemed fresh and exciting.

He had no idea what he was going to be facing next.

Chapter 13
The Bloody Ring

By wastelands standards, the woman on the platform was absolutely a great beauty. Although her skin was rather coarse, she had a superb figure, and the cleavage she was revealing was enough to drive any man wild with fantasies. She wore very little, just enough to cover her most sensitive parts while occasionally revealing them, and her slender legs were just barely covered by ragged silk stockings. From top to bottom, she was one hell of a treat for the eyes.

Her eyes were beguiling, while her movements were teasing and seductive. When she walked, she swayed her hips in a very exaggerated fashion, causing those who saw her to follow her with their gazes.

With someone like her standing on the platform, everyone's attention was drawn to the center of the room.

"Sorry for keeping you all waiting for so long! The next duel for today is between Benson of the guard forces and the famous hunter Tram. Both of them are proud warriors of our base. Who will be the one to win? Let's watch and see!"

After giving a brief introduction, the seductive woman hurriedly retreated from the stage as animalistic cries began to ring out from throughout the room.

Two muscular men dressed in briefs who were surrounded by a retinue of others made their way out from the crowds. Each wore ragged caped cloaks, and neither of them was carrying any weapons or defensive items. They used neither boxing gloves nor boxing helmets. After moving to stand atop the dueling ring they simultaneously cast off their tattered capes, revealing their tough muscles and chiseled physiques. The two looked quite similar in size and shape, but one was white while the other was black.

The two bowed slightly to each other, but both stared unblinkingly at the other as they entered combat stances. The dangerous auras emanating from the two of them spoke plain as to what type of people they were; not only were they highly experienced warriors who had experienced many battles, they were also both the type of person

to take the other's life if the opportunity arose.

Cloudhawk watched all of this, rather dazed. Right at this moment… clang! A copper gong was suddenly struck, scaring Cloudhawk out of his wits. Right at that moment, those two muscular warriors let out bestial growls as they charged towards each other like a pair of stampeding rhinos.

The black man was the first to deliver a heavy blow. Whoosh! The white man had feigned an opening to lure in that attack, only to ensure that it missed. The white man then delivered a crushing knee-strike to the black man's gut, and the black man instantly hunched over, curling up like a shrimp. The white man then delivered a right elbow to the black man's back.

The two consecutive strikes caused such heavy internal injuries that blood instantly came flying out from the black man's mouth. One could imagine how heavy these two blows had been! One final elbow knocked the black man to the ground.

"YEAH!" The white man let out a furious howl as he lifted up his leg, then slammed it downwards. The black man hurriedly flipped backwards to dodge, and the tough wooden boards right in front of him were caved in by the force of that stomp. The white man didn't halt his attacks; after missing with his first stomp, he kicked straight out of the caved-in floorboards and struck the black man, knocking him into a corner of the ring with splinters all over his body.

The white man pounced forwards, about to press the attack, but the fallen black man actually hooked his leg, catching the white man off-guard and knocking him to the ground. The black man hurriedly flipped up and rose to his feet, then pounced towards the white man like a leopard. He grabbed the white man, then rammed him into one of the dueling ring posts like a monk beating a gong.

Boom! The entire ring shook, and a large amount of blood began to pour out of the white man's head. The black man seized the opportunity to kick the white man into the ropes, causing even the tough ropes to bend backwards. Just as the white man was about to bounce off the ropes, the black man delivered another vicious kick.

Bang! Blood poured out of the white man's mouth, spraying the faces of those beneath him with a bloody mist. This seemed to energize and excite the crowd, making them scream even more excitedly as frenzied roars swept through the crowd!

The screams of the crowd seemed to help the dizzied white man come to his bearings. He shook his head hard, then let out a guttural, inhuman scream from his blood-flecked lips. Turning, he used the ropes to slingshot him forwards like an arrow. As the black man charged towards him with yet another kick, the white man suddenly grabbed the black man's leg with both arms and then threw him down onto the ground… then gave the leg a hard twist. CRACK!

The black man let out an agonized scream as his leg was broken. The white man then reached out and grabbed the black man's head, then slammed the back of his head into the ground. Once, twice, thrice… the black man's eyes rolled up as he lost consciousness, with blood pouring out of his every orifice.

A tidal wave of screams swept across the room, and all of them were chanting the same thing! "KILL HIM! KILL HIM! KILL HIM!"

The wave of cries seemed to serve as a catalyst, spurring the white man onto even greater savagery. His punches flew out like raindrops in a storm, striking the black man on the face nonstop as though he was giving vent to some hidden rage. It was like the black man had killed his father or something! Blood splattered everywhere, bringing an exhilarating, sickening brutality to this fight.

Just a few seconds later, the black man had already been beaten into an unrecognizable pulp! The white man lifted up the half-dead black man over his head, letting out a series of growls from his blood-covered mouth. He was like a victorious lion proclaiming dominance over his domain.

"TRAM! TRAM! TRAM!" The entire room exploded with cheers of celebration! The white man brought the black man's back down across his knee, hard. The terrifying sound of bones splintering could be heard as the black man's spine was broken. The white man then casually tossed the black man out of the dueling ring.

Once again, everyone let out celebratory whoops of joy. As for those who had lost their bets on the black man, they began to let out curses. Some of them began to paw at the waitresses, dragging them off into nearby private rooms to give vent to their frustrations.

"That was truly an exciting battle!" An alluring voice rang out as that seductive woman dressed in silk stockings once more stepped into the ring. "Next, we have a very special program for you. Let's welcome our latest newbie into the arena!"

By now, Cloudhawk had a completely dazed look on his face. *Oh, fuck… was this his job? No wonder no one wanted this job. This was suicide!* Cloudhawk immediately cried out, "I quit! I'm going home!"

"Quitting? Not your call!" The black bouncer by his side snickered, a detestable look on his face. "Rules of the inn say that if you break your contract, you lose your hands." He pulled out a machete, then leered at Cloudhawk menacingly. Several other burly bouncers walked over as well.

This time, he was in serious trouble! Cloudhawk never imagined that something like this would happen. The black man who had been fighting in the dueling ring was now lying right next to Cloudhawk. His face had been completely destroyed, with his nose broken, his teeth shattered, his jaw dislocated, and his spine severed. Even if he survived, he'd be nothing more than a useless cripple.

He had been a very skilled combatant, but he had still ended up being beaten into such a state. How could a small guy like Cloudhawk possibly endure a punch from that big white man?

"NOOB! NOOB! NOOB!" Everyone around him was shouting with increasing excitement.

The black bouncer grabbed Cloudhawk, then tossed him into the dueling ring. Cloudhawk landed on the blood-soaked wooden boards with a thudding sound, then frantically clambered to his feet. The lights above him were dazzling him, and the cries of the crowd were truly thunderous.

"SMASH HIM! SMASH HIM! SMASH HIM!"

Fuck, the two of us are in completely different weight classes! It was like a giant gorilla battling a skinny monkey! Was there even a point to a battle like this?

Of course there was!

There was entertainment in watching a fight between two equally-matched opponents. There was also entertainment in watching a fight in which one opponent was overwhelming stronger than the other. Everyone wanted to hear the sound of bones crunching! They wanted to smell the blood, to bathe in it, to hear the weak newbie scream in agony. This was the point of entertainment!

The woman clad in silk stockings watched as Cloudhawk was tossed into the arena, not an ounce of pity in her eyes. She was all smiles as she said, “The time for our next performance has come! An even more exciting, even bloodier, and even more delightful feast for your eyes awaits you. Are you all ready?”

“SMASH HIM! SMASH HIM! SMASH HIM!”

The arena was surrounded with frenzied, twisted, yet faceless faces. No hint of human decency or rationality could be seen in those eyes. They were like wolves who wanted to drink blood, wanted to slaughter, wanted to give vent to their own frustrations.

Several machete-wielding bouncers were standing below the ring, glowering menacingly at Cloudhawk. If Cloudhawk dared to escape from the dueling platform, the end result would be that they would hack him to death with their machetes.

Shit. I was tricked again! But it was too late for any regrets.

Tram glanced at the small figure disdainfully. This kid was probably an entire generation younger than him. How could he possibly be interested in a fight against someone like this? And judging from the kid’s youthful features and the look of terror in his eyes, he probably had never even experienced any actual combat before. The battle had yet to begin, but the kid was already at the point of collapse. For Tram to battle someone like this was actually rather embarrassing and disgraceful!

Still, the man had to eat. Tram had to kill the kid, and would do so using the most brutal, the most sickening, and the most entertaining methods that he could. This would be one of the most exciting performances the inn would hold today, and it was performances like this which the inn relied upon to draw in more customers!

Tram wiped the blood from his face, but only succeeded in making himself look even more menacing. He chuckled. “Hey kid. I’m gonna break your bones, one by one. Enjoy the next few seconds of life!”

Cloudhawk had been enduring all types of abuse during the past month. Although he felt rather scared, he felt even more rage at the unfairness of it all, and he glared right back at Tram and screamed, “Go fuck your mother!”

Instantly, everyone around him exploded with cheers. Hey, the newbie seemed to have a bit of a temper! This made him a bit different from the kids who were usually sent up to be killed.

“Place your bets, everyone! Place your bets on how long this newbie will be able to last. One minute, two minutes, or even three minutes!?” The red-nosed proprietor beamed merrily as he kicked off the betting. Each time he held one of these spectacles, he was able to rake in large amounts of cash. The inn patrons all began to place their bets, causing the scene to grow increasingly lively.

“Are you all ready?” The seductive woman dressed in silk stockings licked her lips in a tantalizing fashion, then announced, “Let the performance begin!” Swaying her hips, she left the ring. Clang! The bronze gong was struck once more.

Cloudhawk suddenly shot forwards like a leopard, landing a kick directly center on Tram’s chest and sending him staggering backwards. This strike contained much more force than anyone would’ve imagined, and even someone as tough as Tram found it hard to bear.

A collective ‘oh’ rang out from the crowd.

Tram never imagined that this would’ve happened. His eyes bulged out with shock as he staggered backwards, nearly falling to the ground. He hurriedly propped himself up with one hand, only to realize that a fist was right in front of his face.

The kid possessed astonishing speed and strength. He looked so weak that a strong wind could blow him away. How the hell was he this strong? The most surprising thing of all was, just a few moments ago the kid had a look of utter terror on his face, almost as though he was a helpless little kitten. Now, he seemed to have transformed into a leopard!

Tram was able to avoid this strike, but was only able to do so in a very awkward fashion. Upon missing with his first punch, Cloudhawk leapt upwards and used his own head to headbutt Tram on the bridge of his nose.

Cloudhawk had spent every day of the past month being used as a punching bag by the mercenaries, but he had learned a few things as well. He had already learned some of the most basic fighting techniques, at least!

Tram could feel his nose splintering, and tears couldn’t help but begin to pour out of his eyes. Cloudhawk didn’t give him any chance to recover at all. Cloudhawk lifted up his right arm, then delivered a powerful punch to Tram’s lower jaw. His skinny little arm contained an unbelievable amount of force, damn near breaking Tram’s jaw

entirely!

Chapter 14
The Crazy Innkeeper

One thought went through Tram's mind. *Fuck. I underestimated the kid.* The kid looked skinny and weak, but he was very physically strong. He was quite possibly a strength-focused metahuman!

Cloudhawk had no actual combat experience. This was his first time actually dueling another person in a real fight, but he felt as though everything was flowing together perfectly. He could sense how all of his muscle groups were moving together in concert, and that he had exquisitely perfect control over them. There were certain high-accuracy movements which he never would've been able to carry out in the past, but now he was able to do so effortlessly.

Incredible agility, perfect harmony, overwhelming speed and strength… is this really my body?! Cloudhawk never imagined that he had become this strong. This month had been an absolutely transformative one for him.

Crack! Crack! Cloudhawk leapt into the air, using one leg to kick the man in his side while the other leg kicked him in the chest at high speed. This was a beautiful double-kick, and it sent Tram stumbling backwards once again. Tram felt dizzy, and blood was spurting out of his numb nose. The consecutive barrage of attacks had all but completely disoriented him for a moment.

Still… that brief moment of blankness was quickly replaced by a sense of humiliation! A punk kid like this had actually beaten him this badly?

Just when Cloudhawk thought that he had found his rhythm, Tram let out a grizzly roar and began to windmill wildly with his fists, with one lucky punch connecting with Cloudhawk's chest. Cloudhawk felt as though he had just been hit with a sledgehammer, and he was knocked flying into the air before landing several meters away.

"Graaaah…" Cloudhawk rolled on the ground, clutching his chest in agony. Only now did he finally realize that the mercenaries had all been taking it easy on him during training. Otherwise, given how strong they were, how could he have possibly survived

their beatings for so long?

Not good! Cloudhawk didn't even have a chance to climb to his feet before a large, callused hand suddenly latched onto his leg. He was dragged upside down into the air, swung in an arc, then sent flying straight towards one of the wooden ring posts.

THUD! Cloudhawk slammed skull-first into the wooden ring post. Black spots appeared before his eyes, and he nearly passed out. A large amount of blood poured out of his scalp and into his eyes, causing the entire world to turn crimson.

This had been an extremely heavy blow! Cloudhawk felt as though the entire world was spinning, and for a moment he had no idea where he was. The punch he had taken to the chest had been a heavy strike as well, rendering him barely able to breathe. Several of his ribs were probably broken; even for a recovery metahuman, such heavy wounds would be difficult ot bear.

Clearly, Tram himself was a strength metahuman. Although he wasn't a very high-class one, he had undergone years of training, and his abilities had many years to ripen and mature. For all these reasons, he was more than twice as strong as Cloudhawk was!

Tram no longer underestimated the kid; he now viewed Cloudhawk as a serious opponent. Laughing wildly, he glared at the kid as the latter rolled around the floor in agony. "What's wrong? That all you got?"

The spectators began to chant in unison again. "STAND! STAND! STAND!"

A few moments later, Cloudhawk finally managed to just barely struggle to his feet. He shook his head a few times, allowing his vision to clear up once more. He once more regained his focus, and he locked his gaze upon the man in front of him.

Both of them had faces covered with blood, and they glowered at each other like vicious beasts that had run into each other within a narrow passageway in the wastelands.

The cries of the spectators were growing louder and louder. Not only was this kid a much better fighter than they had imagined, he was much sturdier as well. After taking two incredibly heavy blows, he was still able to climb up to his feet. This alone was quite impressive! Even Tram was slightly startled by this. Still, the startlement didn't have any impact on his movements at all. This time, he launched the first attack and delivered a frontal punch!

Cloudhawk's hands rose in a defensive position, but a strange smile flashed at the corners of Tram's lips. His attack had been a feint. Just as Cloudhawk prepared his defensive stance, Tram suddenly cancelled his punch and stepped forwards, ramming his shoulder into Cloudhawk and knocking him off-balance.

Tram's movements were incredibly fast. Next, he used his right arm to sweep Cloudhawk's legs. Cloudhawk had already been knocked off-balance; now, he was sent flying into the air. Tram then used his left hand to grab Cloudhawk by the back, straightening him upside-down and then driving him downwards towards the ground in a head-first fashion. If Cloudhawk really did smash into the ground, his spine would definitely be completely shattered.

Not good! A sense of tremendous danger filled Cloudhawk's mind, and a tendril of flaming heat suddenly burst out of Cloudhawk's chest. His irises began to turn red as an enormous amount of power erupted from his body. He actually managed to break free of Tram's grip, then used his elbow to deliver a vicious blow to Tram's face, forcing Tram to jerk backwards and making it impossible for Tram to immediately act against him. Cloudhawk seized this moment to do a somersault in midair, using both legs to kick-off Tram's chest. Tram fell to the ground, but not before he was able to send Cloudhawk flying as well.

The two ended up being knocked to the ground at the same time by each other. However, Cloudhawk clearly suffered a heavier fall; all of his bones felt as though they were dislocated, and he very nearly fainted from the pain.

The inn was a cacophony of noise. This was simply a dazzling display for them! They were all able to see what a close call that had been. If the little devil had been just a half-second too slow, he probably would've died. By now, everyone could tell that although the kid wasn't very experienced, he had superb combat awareness and was able to respond in an almost instinctive manner.

Tram's face was beginning to puff up like a balloon. Thankfully for him, he was an extremely healthy and strong man; a few small injuries like this wouldn't have much of an impact on him. As for Cloudhawk, his decent constitution and tough physique meant that he hadn't been irrecoverably injured either.

The two rose to their feet at the same time, then charged towards each other once again. Bam! Cloudhawk landed a kick on Tram. Crack! Tram landed a punch on Cloudhawk!

The two were of completely different sizes, but both their faces were covered in blood as they furiously battled against each other. Cloudhawk was a bit lacking in technique and experience, and so just a few blows later his right arm was trapped once more. Tram gave his right arm a hard tug… and with a crunching sound, Cloudhawk's right arm was dislocated!

This time, the pain Cloudhawk felt was truly, heart-piercingly agonizing. The sensation was so intense, Cloudhawk was instantly covered in cold sweat… and yet, instead of sapping him of his will and resolve, it actually stimulated the innate stubbornness inside of him. Ignoring the danger of his right arm being permanently maimed, he delivered a truly vicious knee-strike to Tram's groin!

This time, his strike was right on the money, and Tram let out a miserable howl that was utterly inhuman. Cloudhawk seized this opportunity to rake two of his fingers over Tram's eyes! Yet again, this strike caught Tram off-guard and he was unable to defend against it. Cloudhawk then gave him one more kick, sending him stumbling backwards towards the edges of the dueling ring.

Tram was temporarily blinded, unable to open his eyes. All he could do was to windmill his arms about blindly, hoping to be able to buy himself some extra time. Who would've thought that Cloudhawk would scamper forwards and trip his legs? Tram lost his balance and fell backwards, and his tough body ended up falling outside of the dueling ring.

The inn was completely silent for a few seconds… and then the cheers of the spectator burst forth once more! "NOOB! NOOB! NOOB!" This hadn't exactly been exhilarating, as they had been hoping to see blood and brains flying everywhere. That hadn't happened. And yet, this had truly been an unexpected surprise and pleasure. The half-grown kid, the one they had thought would be killed, had ended up winning!

Although luck had played a part in it, all the slightly more experienced spectators could tell that this kid wasn't an ordinary one!

Cloudhawk panted raggedly. He never thought that he would actually be able to beat that dangerous fellow. His face was as swollen as a pig's face, but it was covered with a look of gratification and joy. He had no idea that he had become this powerful!

Bruised, battered, and swollen-faced, Cloudhawk walked towards the red-nosed man. "Where's my meat?"

“MEAT?!” The red-nosed innkeeper no longer had that friendly, amiable look on his face. His voice was now both shrill and cutting. “You wrecked my performance, and you want to ask for payment? Just fuck off!”

“I earned it!” Cloudhawk could feel a ball of fire blazing in his chest. This was no longer a matter of meat; he felt completely insulted, and a desire for blood was filling his thoughts. “How dare you refuse!”

“A stupid, arrogant kid like you wants to threaten and berate ME?” Rednose was enraged. “Waste the fucker!” The black bouncer immediately lifted up his machete and hacked downwards towards Cloudhawk.

In this day and age, ‘trust’ and ‘honor’ were jokes. However, Cloudhawk never would’ve imagined that this man would have reached such a level of depravity! The man had first lied to him to try and get him killed in a duel. Now, not only was he reneging on the payment he owed Cloudhawk, he was trying to kill him!

The black bouncer’s strike was fast and furious. Cloudhawk did his best to avoid it, but the blade still scraped past his back and left a huge, gaping wound there. Fiery pain filled every inch of his body, and blood spurted out of the wound and matted his clothes.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” The red-nosed innkeeper’s gaze was filled with malice. “A punk-ass kid like you wants to try and take something away from me? You’ll be missing your two hands when you leave!”

The spectators in the inn began to whoop with excitement, as though a new, unexpected performance had just started.

“Great idea!”

“Chop his hands off!”

“Waste him!”

The black bouncer strode forwards, machete in hand. Everyone called out excitedly as they began to circle around the two of them. Seeing the situation, Cloudhawk had only a single thought in his mind – Flee! Fuck the rat jerky! Cloudhawk’s entire body was slippery with blood. He turned, pushed aside a burly man, then made a beeline towards the exit. However, right at this moment, one of the other patrons stuck out a

leg and intentionally tripped him.

Thud! Cloudhawk instantly lost his balance and smashed into a wooden table, breaking it into tiny pieces. As he fell, he tore the wound on his back even wider. The agonizing pain was about to cause him to pass out.

“Ahahah!”

“Waste him! Waste him!”

The entire inn was filled with those mocking, malicious calls. The spectators only cared about further fanning the flames, and not a single person stepped forward to intervene or have the matter be brought to an end. Their faces were all distorted with savagery. This was a savage era, and the hearts of men were even more savage!

The black bouncer lifted his machete up high, then chopped downwards once more. Cloudhawk’s injuries were so heavy that he couldn’t even rise to his feet. He never would’ve imagined that he would die in a place like this, and die in such a pathetic fashion. But just as he was about to close his eyes and wait for death…

Clang!

A metallic clanging sound rang out with explosive power. It was another blade that clashed against the former, causing sparks to fly everywhere!

The bloody scene which everyone had been eagerly anticipating failed to materialize. A snow-white machete suddenly appeared out of nowhere, stopping the black bouncer’s machete in its tracks. What completely flabbergasted everyone was that this machete had easily and single-handed stopped the heavy, two-handed hacking blow from the black bouncer.

The machete which saved Cloudhawk’s life was roughly two feet long and shaped like a dog’s leg. It had a straight back but a curved blade, and was heavy at the back but narrow at the front. It gleamed with a cold, almost snowy light… and Cloudhawk recognized it. Wasn’t this Mad Dog’s machete?

The black bouncer’s hand had turned numb, and a large notch had appeared on the edge of his blade. Before the bouncer even had a chance to assess the situation, his opponent struck out with his other hand and sent a dazzling streak of cold light flashing downwards. The black bouncer felt his arm suddenly become lighter as his

hand suddenly fell to the ground, still clutching that machete.

"AHHHH!" The bouncer clutched his severed arm, screaming miserably as blood continued to spurt out of it nonstop, almost like a faucet that had been permanently turned 'on'.

Mad Dog lifted his leg up, then delivered a kick. The bouncer's chest was completely caved in as all of his ribs shattered apart. He flew backwards into the cabinets behind him as though he had been shot out of a cannon, causing all types of wine bottles to fall down to the ground and making the inn reek even more heavily of alcohol.

This had all happened in just the blink of an eye. Everyone was dazed for a few seconds… and then they began to scream with even more excitement.

"Mad Dog?! What the hell!" Rednose revealed a look of rage and terror. He obviously recognized the hideous black man standing in front of him. "I done nothing to you! Why are you going crazy on me?"

"Heh. Heh heh. Heh heh heh…" The scar on Mad Dog's hideously ugly face was twisting and contorting like a centipede as he grinned, and his voice was both deep and hoarse. "Bullyin' a member of the Tartarus mercenaries? Are you that fuckin' tired of livin'?"

"Tartarus?" An ugly look appeared on Rednose's face. "Are you talking about the kid? Shit, I didn't know he belonged to you guys! This is all over five strings of rat jerky, right? Take it! I'll give it to'm, alright?"

"TOO LATE!" The machete flashed once again. This time, it landed on the bodyguard in front of the innkeeper, and it cut straight through the man's shoulder and all the way down to his waist, tearing through flesh and bone alike. It was a terrifyingly wet sound, and the man was virtually split in half by this blow.

Mad Dog's strength was utterly terrifying! It didn't even look like he was hacking a man in half; it was as though he was just cutting through a piece of melted butter!

Blood sprayed everywhere as the man's organs burst out, drenching Mad Dog in blood. The thick, nauseating scent of blood seemed to intoxicate him, causing his face to become increasingly savage and terrifying. In fact, he looked almost maddened and intoxicated.

"Move, move! All of you, g-" Rednose didn't manage to finish the final word, because

an unbelievably fast streak of cold light swept right through his neck, cutting open his skin, chopping through his flesh, slicing open his veins, and splitting apart his bones with a ripping sound. There was nothing and no one who was able to stop this from happening. The cold machete cut through him as easily as tofu!

The entire world seemed to spin before Rednose's bulging eyes. There was a look of surprise in those eyes, as though he didn't understand why his field of vision had just completely changed. Only when his gaze fell upon his own headless corpse did a look of endless horror and amazement appear in his eyes.

The disco lights in the inn continued to spin about, and the hard rock music continued to blare. As for the blood spurting out of that headless corpse, it was like a newly popped bottle of champagne that helped everyone present celebrate this special event.

"Mad Dog's gone mad!"

"Kill him!"

The bouncers in the inn all knew Mad Dog's reputation. Once the man went mad, the only way to stop him was to kill him. Otherwise, he wouldn't stop until he wiped everyone out! These bouncers were, by nature, exceedingly vile men; this was true for almost everyone capable of rising to positions of importance in Blackflag Outpost. None of them were fools! Machetes, staves, daggers… all sorts of weapons were drawn out as everyone charged straight towards Mad Dog!

The disco ball spun even faster, and the heavy rock music seemed to pound even louder. This party was about to go completely out of control!

Chapter 15
A Bloody Party

Pandemonium. Utter pandemonium! The disco ball continued to whirl merrily as Mad Dog moved through the inn like a crazed dancer, his every motion filled with speed, agility, and madness!

Clang! His machete chopped straight through an iron rod, then cleaved off the head that was directly behind it as easily as chopping apart a watermelon.

Even as a warrior inside the inn lifted up his weapon to strike at Mad Dog, Mad Dog used his twin machetes to deliver seven or eight hacking blows against his body. He was like a whirling dervish, his twin machetes dancing like butcher blades that were carving off chunks of meat for a customer. In the twinkling of an eye, that man was chopped into unrecognizable shapes. His blood spurted everywhere, bathing everyone around him in that sticky stench.

The heavy rock music seemed to blare louder and louder, urging Mad Dog on. *Wreck everything! Break everything! Smash everything! KILL EVERYONE!* Mad Dog was like an insane artist, and his every motion, his every chop, and his every kill was like a beautiful crescendo of violence in all of its terrible beauty. Every single person brought down by his chops lost at least one limb!

However, no matter how strong Mad Dog was, he was still just one person whereas the inn had over ten bouncers. Even some of the guests ended up getting drawn into this ridiculous, meaningless fight.

A slender, agile form that was shaped rather like a hyena pounced towards Mad Dog from behind, delivering a dagger-strike to the back of Mad Dog's neck. Mad Dog had already entered his berserk state, where he only attacked and never defended at all. As a result, he was instantly thrust into a perilous situation.

"AHHH!" Cloudhawk managed to squeeze out a bit more strength out of his body, surprising even himself. He lifted a bar stool up, then roared angrily as he charged forwards to smash it against the ambusher's head. CRACK! Splinters flew everywhere! As for Cloudhawk, he barreled into the man and knocked him down the ground, and

the two rolled over a few times in on the blood-matted floor.

The dagger-wielding man was also a savage fellow. Blood was pouring out of his dazed head, but he still had the presence of mind to deliver a back-handed stab with his dagger. Cloudhawk wasn't able to dodge, but he was able to twist his body slightly, ensuring that the dagger didn't strike any of his vital organs. At this moment, he realized that all that time he had spent dissecting corpses alongside Mantis hadn't been a waste after all. At a time like this, it was helping him stay alive.

A stabbing pain followed as the dagger pierced into his body, but Cloudhawk ignored it as he picked a long wooden spike from the ground, then almost instantly shoved it deep into his opponent's eye socket. The man almost instantly stopped moving without even letting out a scream.

A savage, bestial expression was on Cloudhawk's face. No one else dared to even draw near him. As for Mad Dog, by now he had hacked over ten people to death in succession, bathing the entire inn in blood. All of the tables had been destroyed, reducing the insides of the inn into rubble. Only now did the spectators begin to feel fear, and they all began to flee en masse.

After having luxuriated in slaughter, Mad Dog had worked the insanity and the bloodlust out of his system. He seemed back to his normal self, and he glanced sideways at the blood-covered Cloudhawk. "Hah! Not dead yet?"

Cloudhawk had a dislocated elbow, several broken ribs, a long machete-wound across his back, and a dagger in his chest. Even for a recovery metahuman, wounds like this were incredibly dangerous! Cloudhawk didn't respond, he just wrenched the dagger out of his chest.

"Ahaha! Not bad, kid. Pretty tough!" Mad Dog inserted his two machetes back into their sheaths. "No time to waste. Hurry up and grab what you want. We need to leave this place immediately."

Almost everyone in the inn had been killed, with the few survivors having fled long ago. Mad Dog wasn't sure how heavy the consequences would be for this, but since he already killed so many he figured he might as well grab their things. Besides, things probably wouldn't get too out of hand.

Mad Dog swept the entire inn clean of everything of value, while Cloudhawk scoured

it for food. When he pulled open a drawer, he discovered a glittering silver object. It looked like a fairly exquisite silver revolver!

This innkeeper actually had a revolver? What a dangerous fellow he was! If Rednose had pulled out the gun and used it, the results of the wild melee would've been completely different. More importantly… this thing had to be worth at least twenty or thirty strips of rat jerky, right?!

Cloudhawk wasn't able to find any bullets. Who knew where Rednose had hidden them? Still, it didn't matter. He tucked the gun into his clothes and continued to scour the place for other valuables.

When the two blood-splattered mercenaries left the inn, the people outside instantly flooded inside to grab whatever was remaining. The devastated inn was once more thrust into pandemonium, with new fights breaking out as some of the looters began to fight each other. As a result, a number of new corpses were created as well. In the end, someone set the inn alight. The flames reached towards the skies, flickering brightly and signifying an end to this performance!

By the time Cloudhawk reached the mercenary base, he had lost so much blood that he was in a rather dazed state. Mad Dog dragged him over to Mantis' workshop, tossed him onto a table, then paid him no further attention.

Mantis frowned slightly when he saw Cloudhawk's wounds. He quickly reset the dislocated bones, then poured some medicinal fluids from a glass bottle that held certain mutated plants within them. He first smeared the fluids over the various wounds, then cut apart Cloudhawk's clothes, picked up a sewing needle, and began to stitch the wounds together in a very practiced manner.

These wounds were very serious. Any ordinary person would've died, no questions asked. Even recovery metahumans would be in danger, especially if the wounds became infected. Fortunately, Cloudhawk was in luck. Mantis was one of the top physicians within Blackflag Outpost, and the medicinal fluids he had extracted from the mutated plants were used to help fight back against any possible infections. As for whether Cloudhawk would survive or not, that was up to his own fortitude.

The others were gathered at the training grounds of the mercenary base. When Slyfox understood what had happened, he was so furious he was about to explode. "Blackflag Outpost is no longer the same place it was a year ago. Why the fuck did you have to

cause such a huge shitstorm? Did you even think about the amount of trouble we are gonna be in?"

Mad Dog's body was still caked in blood and gore, but he had a disdainful look on his face. He replied in an uncaring voice, "How big a shitstorm can it be? I just killed a few assholes, that's all." Right at this moment, Mantis walked over towards them as well. Mad Dog asked casually, "Hey, the kid dead yet?"

"I hope he does!" Slyfox didn't even wait for Mantis to respond before saying angrily, "I told the kid not to run around. Now he's done gone and kicked over the hornet's nest. He really is a natural born troublemaker!"

Right at this moment, the domineering sound of a revving motorcycle could be heard directly outside their gates.

"Here already? That was fast." Slyfox gestured with his hands and all of the mercenaries picked up their weapons. Moments later, the gates were forcibly kicked open from the outside, and a gigantic figure rushed in alongside ten-plus soldiers.

If you didn't already know what the concept of 'badass' was, you would as soon as you saw this guy, no dictionary needed. He was two meters tall, incredibly muscular, and dressed in a tattered tank top that put his chiseled, rock-hard muscles on full display. His tousled golden hair and beard covered his world-weary features, making him look like a proud lion who was facing a great storm with no fear.

He stood there in front of the mercenaries, his two hands pressed behind his back. His waist was ramrod stiff, and his back was as straight as a spear. This was a simple military posture, but it commanded an aura of absolute dominance!

This giant of a man was every bit as impressive as the captains of the Tartarus mercenaries, and the ten-plus figures behind him were all highly-trained soldiers. Most likely, they were just as tough and skilled as the mercenaries themselves. They were amongst the most elite soldiers of Blackflag Ougpost.

Slyfox forced a smile onto his pudgy face. "Grizzly, long time no see! Man, you are lookin' more and more badass every time I see you. What brings you over to my neck of the woods?"

"Don't try that shit on me!" The muscular man nicknamed 'Grizzly' let out a cold snort. His voice echoed like thunder as he said in a very solemn manner, "You know why I'm

here. Hurry up and hand him over!"

"Heeeeey, relax buddy! We just killed a few people, right? The Tartarus company has contributed quite a bit to the outpost over the past few years. No point in getting into a war over a small problem like this, right?" Slyfox beamed merrily as he walked over. "I promise it won't happen again, arrright?"

"Next time?" Grizzly's hard face only sank even more. "If word of this spreads to her ears and pisses her off… do you think there will be a 'next time'?"

A nervous look flashed past Slyfox's face. "That's why I wanted to ask you to help me out here. Yer in charge of the entire outpost's security. C'mon, the two of us have fought together and bled together. If you can't even help a brother out at a time like this… well, let's just say that I really would have misjudged you."

"This is the last time. I swear, this is the last fucking time!" Grizzly's face was dark with rage. "Fine, I'll let Mad Dog off, but you need to hand over the kid that caused all this shit. I'll take his head back and be able to say that I've handled this matter."

"See, you sayin' shit like that just pisses me off." Mad Dog was rather irritated now. "That fucker Rednose was bullying our people. I just so happened to see it myself when I was drinking in his inn. The kid might be a bit pissy sometimes, but he's not the type of guy to cause trouble for no reason."

Grizzly said flatly, "I don't care. Someone has to answer for this disaster."

Slyfox was rather unhappy as well. "Yer makin' things tough for me, y'know?"

Grizzly glared back at him. "You do understand that if I wasn't trying to give the Tartarus company some face, I wouldn't even be standing here chatting with you about this, right? The outpost has its own rules. Someone has to die for what happened today, and that's that!"

No trace of amusement could be seen in Slyfox's eyes. His right hand seemed to 'unconsciously' drift down to one of the pistols on his waist, and his voice actually took on a rare timbre of power and authority. "If yer thinkin' that you can take one o' mine away from me, go ahead give it a try!"

Grizzly's face turned as hard as steel, and popping sounds could be heard coming from his ten fingers. As for the soldiers around him, they all tightened their grips around

their weapons.

“Come on! Let’s do it!” Mad Dog actually drew the machetes from his waist, both his weapons and his body still covered in blood and gore. “First person to back down is a pussy!”

The mercenaries all gathered together as well. As for Mantis, he stood there without moving but a hint of cold light was flashing between his fingers. The situation was incredibly tense, and both sides were at the verge of drawing weapons against each other.

Grizzly knew that there was no way he could deal with all three Tartarus captains by himself, nor could a single squad of elite outpost soldiers deal with the entire Tartarus mercenary company. However… if the Tartarus company truly did choose to go to war against one of the elite outpost squads, it would never again be able to shelter here within the outpost.

Grizzly’s voice became even deeper. “Do you really have to protect that rookie?”

“He might be a useless rookie, but he’s a Tartarus rookie. Nobody, and I mean nobody, has the right to touch a member of Tartarus!” Slyfox’s hands remained pressed against his pistols. Given his speed and control, he would be able to almost instantly draw and fire his guns, taking down at least three or four of the opponents in an instant. He had a relaxed look on his face, seeming to be not the slightest bit worried about the consequences. Slyfox knew exactly what type of a person Grizzly was, which was why he felt certain that the man probably wouldn’t attack.

“Better not regret it later.” Grizzly turned. “Withdraw!” The warriors of the elite squad all sheathed their weapons, then immediately departed from the Tartarus headquarters. A short while later, the sputtering sound of the motorcycle could once more be heard before it disappeared off into the distance.

Mad Dog spat towards the location where Grizzly had been standing. “Fucking poser. He’s nothing more than a dog on that bitch’s leash. Dickless dickwad!”

“Y’know, pissing off Grizzly for the sake of that rookie is the dumbest motherfucking decision I’ve made in my entire life.” Slyfox really was starting to regret it now. “Man, what the hell is going on today? How could all of this shit have gone down?”

Mad Dog’s expression suddenly turned somber for once. “I suspect that the newbie is

actually a multi-meta."

Slyfox's face tightened slightly upon hearing this. "Seriously?"

The vast majority of metahumans only had a single type of metapower. If they wanted access to other metapowers, they'd generally have to inject themselves with certain genomic treatments. However, those genomic treatments were incredibly rare, and the success rate was usually quite low.

Still, a tiny number of people were born with multiple types of metapowers. They didn't need to inject themselves with any gene therapies; all they had to do was to unleash their latent potential and they would be able to develop in multiple areas. Although these 'multi-metas' were incredibly rare, they did exist.

The third captain, Mantis, was himself a multiclass metahuman.

"Aside from enhanced healing abilities, the kid seems to have some sort of agility metapower as well." Mad Dog briefly narrated what he had seen earlier. Given the speed and reaction times which Cloudhawk had displayed in battle, it seemed likely that he had activated some sort of agility metapower. "That means he's not completely useless. We can spend a bit of actual effort on training the kid."

Dual-class metahumans were quite rare as well! Slyfox rubbed his jaw, mumbling to himself. For the first time, he felt that perhaps pissing Grizzly off wasn't a completely meaningless decision.

Actually, Mad Dog's judgement had been off. Cloudhawk hadn't just improved in agility and healing speed; he was definitely a strength metahuman as well. The only thing he was lacking was training and exercise, and the fact that he had been starving for most of his life hadn't helped. This was why Mad Dog hadn't noticed his surprising strength.

Chapter 16
Legacy

Cloudhawk lay there in Mantis' workshop, completely wrapped up in bandages. Mad Dog, Slyfox, and the other mercenaries were watching to one side as Mantis did his job, and Slyfox was already beginning to frown. "What's the situation?"

Mantis replied, "He lost too much blood. He needs a blood transfusion." The ruins didn't have access to blood transfusion technology, but Mantis was the most talented physician in both the Tartarus company as well as the entire Blackflag Outpost. He not only had the ability to test blood phenotypes, he had even developed his own blood transfusion apparatus. Despite that, given the sanitary conditions in Blackflag Outpost, actually using that equipment posed an enormous risk to everyone involved.

Slyfox didn't give a damn. "Then what are you waiting for? Hurry up and give him the blood he needs! I don't care what you have to do; you need to save his life and bring him back to us. If he dies, that'll mean I pissed off Grizzly for absolutely nothing. That would be an abso-fucking-lutely stupid travesty!"

Mad Dog just said, "It's just blood, right? Use mine!"

"You can use mine as well!"

"Shit, I got plenty of blood. Take as much as you need!"

"No way we can let the kid die like this."

"Yeah, life would be much more boring without'm."

More than ten of the mercenaries spoke up to offer their blood. Cloudhawk had only joined the Tartarus company recently, but during this past month his tenacious personality and his hard-working habits had caused everyone to take a liking to him. He was a bit weak, but they had already acknowledged him as a member of the group.

If Cloudhawk was still awake, he would probably be so shocked that he wouldn't be able to shut his mouth. Normally, the mercenaries treated him like absolute dirt… and

yet, today they were all fighting for the chance to help save him by offering their own blood.

As for Mantis, his features remained as blank and emotionless as ever. Without saying a single word, he ran a few blood phenotype tests, then selected the mercenaries who fit his criteria. He withdrew some blood from every single one of them, then used it to fill his blood transfusion bag and began to transfer it into Cloudhawk's body.

In the end, their greatest fears were realized. Although Cloudhawk's condition was temporarily stabilized after the infusion of blood, it once again worsened at around midnight. His entire body was beet-red, and his skin was so hot it was as though he was being burnt by coals. His mind was a blur, and he repeatedly slurred random words.

There was nothing Mantis could do. The medical conditions and equipment were simply too poor. Whenever an injured party suffered a severe infection like this, he would have a less than ten percent chance of surviving. Things were in the hands of the gods, now. All they could do was hope that the kid's destiny was not to die here!

……

Cloudhawk found himself in a foggy, hazy state. He felt incredibly hot, so hot that he could barely breathe. It was as though he was sleeping inside a giant burning cauldron. When Cloudhawk tried to trace the heat to its source, he ended up discovering that it was all coming from that stone which was hanging around his neck.

The stone seemed to have been linked up with his body in a strange manner, connecting with his bones and his flesh to become a part of him. It was unleashing some sort of strange energy that was capable of impacting Cloudhawk's entire body.

In his dazed state, Cloudhawk was actually able to make out the voice of the stone more clearly than ever before. It sounded like the furious waves of the ocean, like the sky, like the earth, like something hidden within the depths of the sea, like the lightless dark of the night, like a behemoth so vast that it could silently swallow a hundred enormous whales without causing any stir.

This was a sea! A sea of willpower, a sea of mental strength, a sea of energy! Was he able to better commune with the stone when he was in his current, trance-like state?

Not only could Cloudhawk sense the ebbs and flows of that sea of mental energy inside

the stone, he could even hear a hoarse voice whispering to him from a hidden location at the very bottom of the sea.

“Truth springs forth from the mind. Your thoughts shall determine all, and what you shall imagine is what you shall see!” Although the voice was soft, it was filled with an astonishing presence and was as stately as the voice of a king. “Awaken, heir to my legacy!”

Cloudhawk felt as though someone had just poured a bucket of icewater over his face. He suddenly woke up from his stupor, only to realize that he hadn’t actually returned to the real world. He was located within a very strange region, with his two feet standing on a pitch-black sea that was as smooth and clear as a mirror.

This wasn’t the real world. This was a dream-world created by that will within the stone!

“W-who is talking?!” Cloudhawk frantically scanned his surroundings. He knew that this was a dream, but he found himself unable to escape it. He had never experienced something as strange as this before, and it was completely outside the bounds of what he could understand.

The endless black mist in front of him began to condense together and form into a tall, savage-looking figure. The figure didn’t seem to be human, but Cloudhawk wasn’t able to see what it looked like. He could only see a pair of red, ape-like eyes glowing within that dark silhouette, as well as a jewel that was glowing in front of the figure’s chest.

Was that jewel the one Cloudhawk had found the other day? Was it originally an adornment upon that suit of unique, peculiar armor? As for the mysterious fellow standing before Cloudhawk, he had to be the jewel’s previous master. He must’ve been able to store his will and his mind into the jewel through some unknown method, and the reason why Cloudhawk had nearly gone mad with berserk rage was due to this man’s influence. As for the strange dream Cloudhawk had fallen into after suffering such heavy injuries, they were also caused by this man.

Cloudhawk stared at the man through the blurry mist that separated the two of them. “Who exactly are you?”

A majestic yet hoarse voice once more rang out from that black silhouette. “A failure who has been forgotten. Who I am no longer matters. What matters is for you to know

who you are."

"Who I am? I'm me!" Cloudhawk was rather confused now. What was this guy talking about? He shouted out rather nervously, "Fuck, man, what's going on here? Why are you in my dreams?"

"No need to be afraid. I won't harm you. In fact, I died long ago. What remains is nothing more than a part of my will which I left inside this stone. Only when certain criteria are fulfilled and when a person with certain potential emerges shall this stone be activated. For now, you can neither see nor sense my entire will, just a fragment which I set up long ago." The speaker was saying such confused, baffling things that Cloudhawk understood none of it at all.

"It has been many years. I have stubbornly remained here, all for the sake of awaiting your arrival. Ever since you picked up that jewel, you have assumed a destiny that you cannot shake off." The black silhouette looked at Cloudhawk, then said slowly, "The world has been bewildered by lies and deceptions. Since the cycle has begun anew, I hope that you shall continue the path which I started but was unable to finish. Bring an end to all these things."

Cloudhawk really had no idea what the man was talking about, but he felt an inexplicable sense of irritation and rejection towards it. "What sort of gibberish are you babbling about? I don't understand a word that you are saying. Let me out!"

"Don't be impatient, young man. I don't have much time left." A hint of aged sorrow appeared within the black silhouette's voice. "I can sense what you are thinking. Do you wish to leave the wastelands?"

Cloudhawk suddenly trembled. "Can you help me?"

"I can't help you leave, not directly… but I can give you what you need more than anything else right now."

"What?"

The black silhouette said slowly, "I can give to you what little power I have left!"

Cloudhawk instantly felt excited. Power. Wasn't this exactly what he needed more than anything else right now? He was still far, far too weak, which was why everyone continued to bully him. If he was as strong as Slyfox or Mad Dog, he would be able to

do whatever he wanted in Blackflag Outpost! This mysterious figure had to be at least as powerful as Mad Dog, right?

The black sea beneath his feet suddenly began to stir, and Cloudhawk had the feeling that he was about to be dragged within the waves. A large amount of an ice-cold substance flowed into his body, causing him to feel a sensation of agonizing pain.

"Unfortunately, at present you are still far too weak. I can only bestow a part of my psionic energy unto you for now." The black silhouette's voice began to fade in and out as it grew more and more indistinct. "Please keep the stone safe. It is the key to both space and time, and is the most important talisman of my race…"

Cloudhawk was like a drowning man at sea. The sense of breathlessness and pressure was absolutely stifling, and he could neither open his mouth nor cry out for rescue. That icy feeling filled every inch of his body, pouring in from every single direction and into every single pore. Cloudhawk frantically tried to reach out and grab something, but was unable to find anything to grip. His consciousness instantly began to fade once again.

Right at this moment, he suddenly felt a hand reach down and grab him, bringing him up from the surface of the water.

"AHHH!" Cloudhawk let out a scream as he woke up.

It was noon. Cloudhawk's entire body was covered with bandages that had strange medicinal smells to them, and every single wound on his body had been neatly stitched shut. Fiery pain radiated through his entire body, as though his skin had been torn open and he had been placed atop a cooking rack. The various strange medicinal pastes that had been smeared across his body made his wounds burn, almost as though they contained salt or spices within them.

Cloudhawk's right elbow was hanging in front of his chest. Right now, he was so weak that he felt as though he had just been chased by a wild beast for ten kilometers nonstop. However, for some reason his mind was incredibly clear and alert, and the surrounding world itself seemed to be more in focus than it had been in the past. He could even hear the mercenaries outside laughing and chatting with each other.

This had to be the mercenary base. Cloudhawk thought back to what had just happened, especially the conversation he had with that strange man in his dreams.

Was it nothing more than an odd nightmare? Cloudhawk shook his head. Ignoring the pain, he got off the bed, walked towards the door, then pushed it open with his one good arm.

The twenty mercenaries that were just about to start eating all came to a sudden halt, their gazes focusing upon Cloudhawk. For a moment, things were completely silent. Cloudhawk couldn't help but feel a bit nervous; were these guys planning on picking a fight with him for having caused them trouble?

But in the next instant… everyone exploded with roars of laughter and cheers!

"HAH! Woke up, kiddo?"

"You really do heal pretty damn fast."

"Man, you got the shit beat out of you, didn't you?"

"How could you let a dumb fuck like Rednose kick you around like that? You really are good for nothing, you know?"

Usually, the mercenaries loved to mock Cloudhawk and laugh at him. However, after his sudden display of power in the inn and his near brush with death, they started to have more positive feelings about this kid that they once loved to hate.

Whap! A fat, meaty hand clapped Cloudhawk on his shoulders. Cloudhawk leapt up like a startled hair, nearly screaming from the pain. *You did that on purpose, you motherfucker!* The clap had landed directly on one of his stitched-up wounds.

Slyfox completely ignored the glowering, twisted look on Cloudhawk's face as he delivered yet another heavy clap with his meaty hand. "You've certainly been making a name for yourself, ya sonufabitch. Not only did you go out and cause trouble, you got the shit beat out of you. You've dishonored the entire damn Tartarus company, y'know?"

"That HURTS!" Cold sweat appeared on Cloudhawk's forehead. He really wanted to plant a punch right into that fat face, but he also knew that was something best reserved for his dreams. "It won't happen next time, alright?"

"Next time? Kill them all, next time. Learn to wipe your own ass and solve your own problems. Got it?" After Slyfox finished lecturing him, he tossed a metal plate onto the

table in front of them with a clattering sound. “In the future, you’ll eat with us, train with us, and go out on missions with us.”

The plate held a chunk of blackened mutabeast jerky, and a few pieces of something that looked like potatoes but which had been all but burnt to a crisp. Slyfox gave the awestruck Cloudhawk a hard glare. “What, food’s not to yer likin’?”

“N-Not at all!” Cloudhawk sat down without even thinking, then began to chew at the food. Although he had no idea what type of mutabeast this meat came from, it tasted far better than any type of meat he had ever eaten before.

Before this, he had only been given two pieces of bread each day. Now, he was able to enjoy wine and meat alongside the other mercenaries, and would enjoy three set meals each day! It was like a poor beggar suddenly coming into an enormous inheritance. This blissful sense of manna falling from the heavens instantly filled Cloudhawk with content and joy.

Cloudhawk never would’ve imagined that rather than castigate him for having caused troubles in the inn, the other mercenaries would actually view them as having formally joined their ranks. His long month of humiliation and labor… had he finally overcome it all?

Chapter 17
Beast Wave

A few days later, Cloudhawk was able to get his stitches removed. In another four or five days, he would probably be completely recovered.

These days spent convalescing were some of the most comfortable days in his life. Not only did Cloudhawk not need to serve as a human punching bag, he was allowed to lay back and relax each day while enjoying three meals of meat. In just a few short days, he had grown considerably more muscular. It was getting to the point where Cloudhawk was actually hoping that his wounds would heal a bit more slowly.

After waking up from his heavy injuries, he improved quite a bit in every single area. The thing was, Cloudhawk didn't feel as though he had improved dramatically in any particular area. Perhaps that dream really was nothing more than a dream. Cloudhawk didn't really pay it too much heed, and he cast that memory to the back of his mind.

By the fifth day, Cloudhawk was more or less recovered. Mantis immediately called Cloudhawk over and ordered Cloudhawk to assist him. The tables in Mantis' workshop were filled with preservative jars that were marked with all kinds of script, as well as many test tubes that were filled with all sorts of strange liquid experiments. The workshop had all sorts of crude, ungainly tools within it as well, but by now Cloudhawk was used to all of them.

Cloudhawk dragged a freshly arrived corpse over and placed it on the dissection table. This was the corpse of a young woman who had probably died recently. Judging from her emaciated frame, she had most likely died of starvation. Similar corpses could be seen everywhere.

"Mantis, what are you going to analyze today?" Cloudhawk picked up his pincers and his scalpel, preparing to go to work. "Heart? Lungs? Liver? Something else?" Although he hadn't completely healed, he had recovered enough to do some work.

Mantis withdrew his blood-covered hands from the chest of a dissected corpse. If Cloudhawk was a new arrival, he probably wouldn't be used to this sight, but over the course of the past month he himself had carried out multiple such dissections, and so

he didn't feel as though anything was off.

The Tartarus mercenary company had three captains, and Mantis was the most inscrutable of the three. He seemed extremely cultured and knowledgeable, and was able to extract strange liquids from random mutated plants which he would mix together into restorative poultices and healing solutions. The reason why Cloudhawk had been able to recover from his injuries so quickly was completely thanks to Mantis, and so Cloudhawk admired the man very much.

Cloudhawk had never seen Mantis in combat before. However, Mantis' skills as a physician alone ensured that he would never go hungry in this era.

"Hang it up high."

Cloudhawk was slightly startled upon hearing Mantis' instructions. Was the strange fellow planning some sort of odd experiment yet again? Still, Cloudhawk didn't waste time asking questions. He immediately tied a rope around the corpse's waist, then lifted it into the air.

Mantis calmly pulled out a silver revolver, then tossed it onto the table. Cloudhawk couldn't help but gawk at that revolver. Cloudhawk had taken it from Rednose's inn, but later on Cloudhawk had passed out from blood loss. By the time he had woken up, the revolver had disappeared. He had felt certain that Mad Dog had confiscated it, as guns were quite valuable; for a rookie like Cloudhawk to possess one really was a waste.

"Shit, isn't that my gun? So you were the one who took it!" Cloudhawk had been given all sorts of grunt work in the mercenary base, and part of his job had been to help maintain their firearms. As a result, he was quite familiar with how firearms worked.

Mantis then fished out an orange-colored bullet and placed it on the table. *The hell?* Cloudhawk was starting to feel rather stunned. Mantis adjusted his glasses, which flashed with a cold light as he did so, making it impossible for Cloudhawk to see the look in Mantis' eyes. Mantis reached out and pointed one finger at the hanging corpse, then said in his customarily cold voice, "Shoot it as fast as you can."

"Is that really a good idea?" Cloudhawk naturally wasn't worried about being disrespectful to the dead; that would be just laughable. His concern was that shooting a corpse was a waste of bullets!

“Just do it!”

Cloudhawk had no idea as to what Mantis was scheming, but there was nothing he could do. The stone-faced man never changed his mind and did what he said. Plus… Cloudhawk had wanted to experience firing a gun for quite some time now.

Cloudhawk picked up the gun, unlatched the cylinder, loaded the bullet, then spun the cylinder back into its proper locked position. Cloudhawk had no experience in gunnery, but for some reason it all felt very natural to him. Just as he was about to raise the gun and then pull the trigger…

Snick! A streak of cold light suddenly flashed through the air and sliced past his face. Clink!

It was a slender, icy-cold surgical scalpel. The scalpel plunged into the corpse’s forehead with perfect precision. Even if you used to most accurate of rulers to measure it, you would find that the scalpel was exactly dead center in the corpse’s forehead, without being even slightly to the left or to the right. In addition, the scalpel blade had sunk completely into the forehead.

Cloudhawk felt as though he had lost control over his jaw muscles as his mouth swung open. He stared, wide-eyed, at the incomprehensible sight in front of him.

“You spent a total of four seconds in drawing the gun, loading the bullet, and then firing. I would’ve been able to cut your throat in a third of a second.”

This was the first time Cloudhawk had seen Mantis launching an ‘attack’. He never would’ve imagined that Mantis was as incredible as this!

“Remember. The more complicated, high-tech, and high-level a weapon is, the more dangerous it is to its own wielder. If you end up relying too heavily on those high-tech weapons, death will be quick to arrive for you. The best weapons are the ones that appear everywhere. They are easy to deploy and easy to use. For a truly talented assassin, even grass and twigs can be used to take another’s life.”

They had known each other for a full month, but Mantis had always been very taciturn, seemingly treasuring his words as if they were gold. He had never said so many things at once, and Cloudhawk felt as though he was getting to know the man all over again.

He was a superlatively talented physician, a strange scientist who liked to dissect

corpses and organs in search of mutations. He was also an incredible apothecary who was able to extract fluids from various mutated plants and use them to create medicinal salves… but it seemed as though all of these things were just his secondary professions!

Slyfox was a gunner, Mad Dog was a warrior, while Mantis was an assassin.

Perhaps Mantis' evolutionary metapowers weren't as high-class as those of Slyfox or Mad Dog, but assassins didn't necessarily need to be the strongest individuals around; they were, however, the most dangerous! Cloudhawk would rather piss off a madman like Mad Dog or a crafty bastard like Slyfox than a viper like Mantis!

Cloudhawk unconsciously mimicked the scalpel-tossing motion. "What type of training do I need to do if I want to reach your level?"

"Your task for today is completed. Leave." Mantis began to put away his tools without even looking at Cloudhawk. "And take your gun!"

Cloudhawk had been feeling rather irritated, but upon hearing the last few words he nearly leapt for joy. Mantis might seem like an icy fellow, but he was actually quite warm-hearted. Not only had he kept Cloudhawk's weapon safe for quite a few days and then returned it to him, he had also taught Cloudhawk a lesson.

In the wastelands, firearms and bullets were used as a common currency for barter. You would always be able to use them to trade for food. Afraid that Mantis might change his mind, Cloudhawk immediately grabbed his gun and left.

As for Mantis, he continued to focus on dissecting and handling his corpses. From start to finish, his facial expressions had not changed a single time.

Upon returning to his room, Cloudhawk pulled out his gun and excitedly rubbed his hands across its surface repeatedly, almost as if he was stroking the hands of a lover. He had never felt as excited as he currently did.

Cloudhawk knew very well that bullets were actually even more valuable than firearms. The reason why the majority of the mercenaries did not use firearms was because bullets were too expensive. A pound of mutabeast meat could only buy you ten or so pistol bullets. Aside from elite marksmen like Slyfox, using guns was a completely impractical and un-economical decision for most mercenaries.

But despite all that, this was still the first valuable possession which Cloudhawk had ever had. Cloudhawk lay there in his bed, his gun by his side. Even though it only held a single bullet, he felt a sense of safety and security with it nearby. Everything was turning for the better.

Cloudhawk let out a long, contented sigh. Just as he was about to blow out the candle and go to sleep, he suddenly heard several loud, clear sounds echo in the skies above the outpost.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

The sounds completely shattered the stillness of the night. Cloudhawk had never heard this noise before. It sounded almost like a large gong being struck, with each sound both loud and long-lasting. The sudden clanging noises brought a sense of unease to all who heard them.

Cloudhawk had no idea what was going on. However, he had been living here in the outpost for more than a month; he was no longer the clueless and rash kid he once was. He carefully pushed open his door to stare at what was happening outside, rather than foolishly charging outside in a blind panic.

Blackflag Outpost was a bedlam of commotion. Many men holding torches were running around, and countless cries and startled shouts filled the air. Cloudhawk was able to vaguely make out one particularly horrified, high-pitched scream.

“A beast wave! A beast wave is upon us!”

Cloudhawk had been in the outpost for more than a month; he knew exactly what a beast wave represented. A cold chill instantly filled his entire body, and an uncontrollable terror quickly rooted itself in his heart. This was terrible!

BANG! His wooden door was suddenly kicked in, and three outpost soldiers charged in and grabbed him unceremoniously.

“What the hell are you guys doing?!”

“A beast wave is attacking. All men are required to take part in the defense. Those who shirk from battle will die!”

The entire outpost was in a state of chaos. The outpost guards were running around

everywhere, grabbing everyone they could. All of the men were corralled like a herd of ducks, then split up into numerous temporary squads.

Cloudhawk wasn't even given a chance to explain, nor would any explanations have mattered. The Tartarus mercenary company was an important part of the outpost's combat forces; they would undoubtedly be sent to a place even more dangerous than this place. And so, Cloudhawk just allowed himself to be conscripted into a squad of roughly two hundred people.

A series of clanking sounds rang out as a guard dressed in a full set of steel armor walked over towards them. He was dressed in at least two or three layers of leather armor underneath the steel, and he wore a half-mask that served as a breathing apparatus. The other guards all stood by his side, with this young elite guard who was dressed in a perfect set of armor clearly being their leader. "I'm Lain, the captain of this squad and a member of the elite guards of Blackflag Outpost. I'll be responsible for commanding your group in defending against the attack."

Captain Lain spoke with great difficulty, as though every single word was extremely taxing for him to say. It was almost as though someone had thrown a lever into his mouth, making it difficult for him to speak. There was an extremely deep scar on the side of his neck; most likely, the wound that had caused that scar had impacted his vocal chords.

"Right now, a large number of mutabeasts are launching an attack against our outpost! All of you, pick up your weapons and protect our home. Fight them to the bitter end!" Captain Lain's hoarse voice rang out like the cry of an owl in the night, causing the listeners to shiver with fear.

Chapter 18
Wolf Pack

The fire pots had all been set alight, and Blackflag Outpost was thoroughly illuminated by lamps and torches. Terror swept through the entire outpost like a tempest, spreading from person to person like a plague. The sounds of sobbing and screaming could be heard everywhere as the terrifying beast wave drew closer and closer.

Beast waves! They were the most terrifying natural disasters which existed in the wastelands! This was a unique type of battle for survival which only wastelanders would ever encounter, a battle launched by large numbers of hungry mutabeasts against the outposts where many humans were gathered.

Cloudhawk had just arrived here a month ago, and so he had naturally never experienced one of these beast waves personally. And yet, he had heard some stories regarding beast waves from the older mercenaries. Supposedly, the vast majority of human outposts in the wastelands ended up being destroyed by beast wave outbreaks. Each beast wave portended a calamitous baptism by blood. Even if the attacked outpost was strong enough to resist the beast wave, it would still suffer heavy losses and rivers of blood would form. Was Blackflag Outpost going to suffer this same fate as well?

An atmosphere of terror and despair pervaded the outpost. Even Cloudhawk felt rather nervous. He had never experienced a calamity like this before, and he had no idea as to what he would be facing.

Just as everyone's hearts were in a state of disarray, a series of frenzied growls could be heard rumbling outside in the wilderness. It sounded like a rumbling landslide, like waves crashing against the shore! The terrifying sounds represented pure bloodlust, madness, and brutality all joined together and then unleash in a single tidal wave of noise. The spiritual pressure they brought alone was enough to shake even the deepest parts of one's soul.

What sort of terrifying creatures could possibly make such hideous sounds? Cloudhawk stared from his position in the walls, and he was able to vaguely make out something. A large number of short, stooped black figures were advancing at high

speeds under the moonlight. They had pairs of dark green eyes that blazed like abyssal fire, and they brought a completely different aura to the biting cold of the night!

What in the world were these things?! Just as Cloudhawk was wondering this question to himself, one of the bow-wielding outpost archers who was standing with bow drawn in one of the archery parapets let out a terrified shout. “Oh, shit. ROTWOLVES!!”

“Fuck, fuck! I can’t even count the number of rotwolves!”

Every single outpost soldier was a carefully selected elite warrior. They were reliable in both personal power as well as mental fortitude, but when faced with such a terrifying sight even people as strong as them couldn’t help but quaver when they spoke, revealing the horror that they felt. As for the squads of irregulars? They were even more terrified.

“The wastelands are filled with those rotwolves.”

“Oh my God… we are all doomed.”

“There’s no way we can beat that many rotwolves. Everyone, run for your lives!”

The motley crew of irregulars captained by Lain almost immediately began to break down. Rotwolves were enormous mutant wolves that roamed the wastelands, and they were named that way because their flesh was so putrid and poisonous that there was no way to consume. Most normal mutabeasts weighed around eighty kilograms, but rotwolves didn’t seem to have an upper weight limit. There had even been sightings of enormous rotwolves that weighed five or six hundred kilograms!

These particular mutabeasts were not only brutal, they were also extremely crafty. Every ordinary rotwolf would be a match for two or three ordinary outpost guards in power, but tonight at least seven or eight hundred rotwolves had already appeared. Things were looking very grim. No one knew how many more rotwolves were lying in wait. Even if there really were just eight hundred, it would be a calamity for the outpost!

Captain Lain had clearly never expected for the situation to be this grim either. His face paled slightly, and his sword-wielding hand was starting to tremble, but he still spoke out in his hoarse voice to calm his men. “Just a few hundred wolves, while we have several thousand warriors. The hell are you all afraid of? Man up!”

But who could possibly maintain their calm in a situation like this? Although the outpost held thousands of warriors and was protected by a defensive perimeter, who could guarantee that front-line soldiers like them would be able to survive? More and more soldiers started to move to flee.

"Archers!" Captain Lain was able to tell that the situation was about to spiral out of patrol. He immediately lifted his sword high into the air, and the six archers behind him immediately drew their bows. The archers on the watchtowers all turned towards him as well. "Kill them!"

Cloudhawk could clearly hear the bowstrings twanging. The first wave of arrows weren't aimed at the beasts outside; they were actually aimed at the fleeing warriors within the outpost. Twang! Twang! Twang! Several fleeing soldiers let out miserable cries as they fell to the ground. As for the archers, they once more nocked their bows and aimed the cruel arrowheads towards the others.

"That's what happens to deserters!" Captain Lain's hoarse voice rang out in everyone's ears. "If Blackflag Outpost is destroyed, do you really think you'll be able to find another place to live? Hell, without Blackflag Outpost, will any of you even be able to survive these wastelands? Pick up your damn weapons. We live or die with the outpost!"

Faced with those taut bowstrings, everyone had no choice but to acquiesce silently. As for Cloudhawk, he felt a degree of respect for Captain Lain. He truly was a valiant and charismatic warrior, and his words were spot on – once Blackflag Outpost fell, would they ever be able to find another place like it?

He might not love this place, but this wasn't the time to leave it! He'd rather die than end up a wastelands scavenger once more! Cloudhawk tightened his grip around his shortsword. He had decided to defend the outpost to the bitter end.

Captain Lain's methods proved to be quite effective in quelling the chaotic situation. He split up the regular soldiers and inserted them throughout his troops, as he knew exactly how unreliable his irregulars were. Not only could his regular soldiers help to smooth out the average level of strength in each section, they would also be able to serve as his supervisory sergeants once battle began.

The wolf pack was moving closer and closer to the outpost. The night was filled with their long, drawn-out howls. Even the earth was shaking slightly as the crazed,

bloodthirsty wolves advanced like a foul wind, and it was as though a dark haze had appeared around the hearts of the men who saw them.

“They are about to attack!”

“Shoot them!”

“Shoot them down!”

The wolves in the pack were actually quite dispersed. Several of the agility metahumans in the vanguard were the first ones to act.

Cloudhawk immediately heard a few sparse gunshots blasting out in the night air, accompanied with the whistling howls of arrows being shot out. Quite a few agonized howls emerged from the wolf pack. Apparently, a number of the rotwolves had been hit.

However, attacks on this level simply were ineffective in serving as a deterrent. In fact, when the beasts smelled the blood and pain emanating from their fellows, they seemed to be spurred into an even greater frenzy. The howls of the wolf pack only grew increasingly fierce. The battle was about to erupt!

Captain Lain commanded his soldiers, “Fire in volleys and don’t stop! Rotwolves don’t have wings. Keep them outside our perimeter!”

Cloudhawk was extremely tense. It was just a group of wild animals, right? Nothing bad would happen. Nothing bad would happen! The outpost had sturdy defenses and had countless experts defending it. It also had…

Cloudhawk wasn’t even able to finish his self-comforting thought before a terrified, despairing voice rang out right next to him!

“LOOK! The skies!”

“What’s that in the skies?!”

The moonlight was being blotted out by what looked like stormclouds. When Cloudhawk unconsciously lifted up his head to stare into the skies, his irises immediately shrank. No… those were no stormclouds. Those were teeming masses of flying creatures who were moving at incredible speeds!

Cloudhawk was only able to see countless pairs of red eyes flashing in the night sky. Judging from their silhouettes, he could just barely tell that they seemed to be enormous bat-like creatures. Just as the wave of rotwolves hit the outside perimeter, the strange winged creatures dove down from the skies like a tidal wave which could not be defended against. They struck down like thunderbolts upon the outpost guards, and they also struck like thunderbolts against the outpost morale.

"Danger! Lie down!" It was unclear as to who called these words out, and it didn't really matter; anyone who encountered a situation like this would almost instinctively lie down. Cloudhawk felt as though a gale blew past his head, and the entire world seemed to be filled with the sound of flapping wings.

"Aaaah!" One of the soldiers on the watchtower was knocked into the air. Even as he was falling to the ground, around twenty black shadows flashed past his body and clawed at him with incomprehensible speed, with each tearing away a section of his body. His body seemed to be as flimsy as wet tissue; in the five short seconds of his fall, over twenty strips of flesh were torn off his body as bits of blood and gore flew everywhere. He screamed in misery as his blood and flesh flew everywhere… and then he slammed to the ground with a thud.

The person landed ahead of Cloudhawk. When Cloudhawk was able to see what he now looked like, he felt a sense of frozen terror within the depths of his very soul. Almost all of the man's flesh was gone, and his ribs were all clearly visible. The organs had been ripped out of his stomach, and his face had been torn asunder as well. He was completely unrecognizable.

Possibly because this had happened so quickly, the poor bastard was somehow still alive despite having been absolutely maimed and disfigured. A gurgling sound could be heard from his throat, and his hands and legs were trembling as though he was trying to climb to his feet.

A few seconds ago, he was a hale and hearty man. Who could believe that this would happen to him in just a few seconds? What a calamity!

The strange, giant bats were circling in the air above the outpost. Each wing was over 1.5 metres long, and they had hawk-like claws and sharp beaks that were as dangerous as razors. The outpost was filled with miserable screams as many people suffered injuries in a twinkling.

This was a type of bloodthirsty animal that loved to eat carrion! They often followed the scent of the rotwolf pack. These two different types of mutabeasts, however, would not engage in direct combat with each other. Rather, they would generally reach a tacit agreement to jointly attack certain targets.

Just as Cloudhawk rose to his feet and took two steps forwards, a giant bat dove downwards towards him at high speed, raking at him with those sharp claws. Sensing the impending danger, Cloudhawk once more fell to the ground, and the giant bat scraped right above him.

It was raining blood in the area around him, with a few chunks of meat and skin landing every so often. The warriors on the watchtower who were responsible for shooting down the wolves were almost instantly ripped to shreds and broken apart, with all of them dying to the sudden attacks from the giant bats.

They were finished! Cloudhawk's heart sunk into despair. With the mutated bats launching aerial raids and disrupting their back lines, there was no way the outpost could mobilize their archers and gunners to attack the wolves from afar. As for the hundreds of powerful rotwolves, once they charged into the outpost they would deliver an absolutely destructive blow to the defenders!

What were they to do? What were they to do?!

Cloudhawk stared at the silhouettes dancing through the chaos. Finally, he understood how weak any individual person was in a war. Not even Slyfox or Mad Dog would be able to do anything at a time like this, to say nothing of him!

Chapter 19
The Alpha Wolf

Several of the wolves in the wastelands raised their heads to let out long howls. This was a signal, a signal to launch the full attack!

The swarming masses of rotwolves suddenly began to accelerate, as though physical inhibitors inside their bodies had suddenly been unlocked or as though they were a group of chained beasts who had suddenly slipped out of their shackles. The ferocious black wave of wolves began to launch a true assault on the outpost.

The area around the outpost was littered with boulders and ruined tires which were stacked together to form a rampart. In the wastelands, a defensive perimeter like this was considered quite strong. An attack from a few dozen rotwolves would be completely unable to do anything to this outpost, but the problem was that they were facing over eight hundred rotwolves and an unknown number of giant bats which were circling around them!

The outpost defenses were breached in multiple areas almost instantaneously, and many rotwolves poured into the gaps. The entire world seemed to be filled with the sounds of combat, slaughter, screams, and frenzied wolf-howls.

In order to avoid the giant bats, Cloudhawk was forced to scurry forwards in a crawling position. He could already hear the sounds coming from outside the ramparts in front of him, as a number of rotwolves leapt upon the bodies of their peers to try and clamber up. Soon, they would be able to make it inside. To just lay here would result in certain death!

Cloudhawk rose to his feet, wanting to flee backwards… but he didn't even make it ten meters before three rotwolves agilely leapt past the ramparts. Their oily green eyes swept across the men before them, almost like proud lions surveying little white hares that were trembling before them. They bared their saliva-covered fangs, then let out low growls from their throats.

Only now did the rest of the terrified soldiers rise to their feet and begin to flee. But it was too late! The rotwolves leapt into the air, pouncing forwards and knocking down

quite a few people. Their sharp claws were five centimeters long and were as tough as steel nails; each swipe of their claws was enough to tear a man open from chest to spleen.

"DIE!" A particularly valiant guard lifted up his iron warhammer, them smashed it downwards towards the rotwolf's head. This blow was heavy enough to leave a large crater in any boulder, and even the rotwolf hunched over from the force of this blow. However, what no one would've expected was that its brain matter didn't splatter out. Clearly, this creature's skull bone was even tougher than stone! The vicious rotwolf retaliated with a swipe of its claws, and half of the guard's face disappeared.

The guard didn't even have time to scream. The rotwolf leapt onto him, knocking him flat and then ripping out his vocal cords and his carotid artery at the same time. This strike tore out half of his throat! The outpost guard's body twitched a few times, then never moved again.

The rotwolf was in no rush to feed. It raised its gore-covered snout, then turned its ghostly, oily-green gaze towards the others. It was already in search for its next target. Its flickering gaze was filled with wild savagery, and it completely broke the morale of the conscripted irregulars.

These beasts were clearly quite different from the wolves of the Old Times. In speed, strength, savagery, and cleverness, they surpassed the beasts of the Old Times many times over.

Just as everyone was about to retreat, a single person charged forwards. Captain Lain drew out his longsword as he raced forwards. He delivered a vicious kick to the rotwolf's side and knocked the heavy beast flying into the air, then chopped his longsword down against the midair wolf's neck. Not even inspecting the wound, Captain Lain then leapt onto the rotwolf's corpse, used it to launch himself even higher into the air, then stabbed downwards as his sword flashed with cold light. The stab just so happened to pierce all the way into a second rotwolf's eye socket!

"AWOOOO!" The final rotwolf howled furiously as it charged towards Captain Lain. Captain Lain relinquished his stuck longsword, as there wasn't enough time to tug it free. He suddenly fell to his knees and bent all the way backwards, just barely dodging the rotwolf's flying pounce.

Riiiiip! A sharp knife suddenly flew out from Captain Lain's metallic wristguard. The

knife easily cut into the rotwolf's soft underbelly. The momentum of the rotwolf's leap carried it forwards resulting in an enormous gaping wound being ripped open. A deluge of blood and foul-smelling organs fell out of the rotwolf's body, dousing Captain Lain in gore.

Only now did the others calm down. As for Captain Lain, he rose to his feet, panting just a little bit. He stepped onto the second rotwolf's head, then forcibly tugged out his longsword. His entire body was covered with that reeking blood, and he looked like a soldier who had just escaped from the depths of hell. He bellowed hoarsely with his damaged vocal cords, "All of you, fight! Anyone who takes a single step back dies!"

The captain had just slain three rotwolves as easily as chopping through vegetables. His dazzling display of skill and valor managed to rally his men and strengthen their morale, which had truly been at the brink of collapse just now.

However, more and more rotwolves began to fly over the walls and press the attack, and every so often the giant bats circling above their heads would swoop down to rip off an ear or tear out an eyeball, or perhaps just rip an entire face off. This battle was an extremely disadvantageous one for Blackflag Outpost. Even Captain Lain ended up receiving a claw-strike as he dispatched one rotwolf after another. If it hadn't been for his layers of armor, he would've been disemboweled by that attack.

Some of the outpost guards tried to use their bows to shoot down those infuriating giant bats, but they simply weren't able to see clearly enough in the night to make out their targets. The bats themselves were pitch-black in color and moved incredibly fast. Not even the finest sharpshooters were able to shoot down more than just a few of them.

The outpost's casualties were growing heavier and heavier. These mutabeasts were even more powerful and vigorous than Cloudhawk had imagined them to be, while not every person was as strong or as skilled as Captain Lain. Ten or so people were sometimes able to use long pikes to stab bloody wounds into a rotwolf, but the berserk rotwolf would still be able to tear half of them to pieces before dying.

"You are not permitted to retreat!"

"All of you, keep fighting!"

Captain Lain was on the verge of hysteria by now. As for the outpost guards, they

supervised the battle with cold detachment, hacking or shooting to death any who dared retreat. Most of the outpost guards were focused on shooting their bows and firing their guns towards the more distant enemies while commanding the irregulars like shepherds with a flock of sheep. The irregulars were meant to stand up in front and fight the ferocious rotwolves in bloody melee, serving as human shields that used their own blood, flesh, and lives to demand an equal amount from their opponents!

This was how war in the wastelands worked. War in the wastelands was like a merciless meat grinder that ground away at the bodies and lives of both sides!

Suddenly, a booming sound rang out as a tremendous blow knocked down the nearby 'walls'. An awesomely enormous rotwolf charged in through the gap, and it was roughly twice as large and four times as muscular as the other rotwolves. It had to weigh around four hundred kilograms , and was almost as tall as an ordinary human being. Its oily green eyes emanated a breathtakingly savage light, and its entire body was covered with long thick fur. It radiated an aura of dominance and power that made it look like a king, and six or seven smaller rotwolves dashed in by its side. Like wolves let into the sheep pen, they began to launch a massacre against the surrounding soldiers.

"Oh, FUCK. That's an alpha rotwolf!" Captain Lain called out loudly, "Give me my gun!" Captain Lain accepted a double-barreled shotgun from another guard, loaded the pellets with lightning speed, then aimed it directly at the alpha wolf. BANG!

The alpha rotwolf was even more alert and nimble than Lain had expected. It had leapt sideways as soon as Lain had aimed the shotgun, and the pellets scraped by its body and ended up hitting a rotwolf behind it. The alpha wolf was thoroughly enraged by this near-miss, and it let out a howl as it charged straight towards Captain Lain. Captain Lain, however, wasn't unnerved in the slightest; he quickly reloaded for a second shot, then fired again! This time, the alpha rotwolf twisted its head sideways, allowing the pellets to hit it on its back and create a bloody mist.

Wounds of this nature were absolutely nothing to something as hearty and muscular as this alpha rotwolf. By now, it was less than ten meters away from Captain Lain, and all the humans it had encountered in its path had been bulldozed away like refuse.

The alpha rotwolf was extremely intelligent. It knew who posed the greatest threat to it, and its goal right now was to eliminate that threat as soon as possible. Its incredibly muscular body suddenly flew into the air as it leapt forwards, its massive wolven claws

landing on a fallen human and almost instantly caving the man's chest in. Blood instantly spurted out of the fallen man's every orifice as the alpha rotwolf then leapt high into the air as it went straight for Captain Lain, who was only six meters away by now.

Even Captain Lain's face tightened as he assessed the situation before him. He immediately tossed away the shotgun, then pulled out the longsword he had planted into the ground. By now, the alpha rotwolf was right in front of him. If he let himself be knocked down, he would be finished!

Captain Lain hurriedly retreated, then stabbed forward with all of his strength. The alpha rotwolf used its massive claws to slap at the blade of the sword, which instantly split apart. The snapped blade of the sword went flying off into the distance, eventually stabbing into the body of the poor bastard the alpha rotwolf had just stepped on earlier.

As for Captain Lain's right hand, it could no longer really be considered a hand. His fingers were all badly mangled from the force of that collision! The alpha rotwolf was simply unimaginably strong; a single blow from its paw had actually warped all of the fingers on Lain's right hand!

Captain Lain, however, was an old soldier who had experienced many battles. Even though he had suffered a heavy injury and was in intense pain, he didn't lose his fighting spirit. In the same instant that his sword was shattered, he used his left hand to pull out a dagger. As the alpha rotwolf leapt towards him, he delivered a vicious straight stab with that knife and managed to stab the alpha rotwolf right in its left eyeball! He then gave the knife a slight twist, resulting in a large amount of blood and eye-jelly pouring out of the wound. "AWOOOOO!" The alpha rotwolf let out an agonized howl!

This sight gave a tremendous boost to the morale of the other soldiers, and they all let out excited roars in response. However, no one foresaw what was about to happen next. The alpha rotwolf suddenly spat out a green, mist-like substance from its body!

The rotwolf was simply too close. There was no chance for Captain Lain to dodge whatsoever. The thick green mist instantly covered Captain Lain's entire body, and he immediately let out an absolutely inhuman scream.

His hands, his face, his exposed flesh… all of it seemed to have been scalded by boiling

water. Every inch of his skin instantly turned beet-red… and then the flesh began to fall off of his body as though someone was tearing at his skin using a cheese grinder. His eyes were instantly blinded by that fiery mist, and when he accidentally inhaled that powerful corrosive substance into his body, it spread throughout his mouth, nostrils, and lungs. It was almost as though someone had poured boiling water into his throat!

Bloody bubbles were popping out of his mouth. Even his tongue was rotting away! Just a few moments later, his entire respiratory system had been completely destroyed, as had his vocal cords. He was now no longer able to even scream. He was a valiant, steely warrior, but no miracle would suffice to address an attack like this.

The alpha rotwolf opened its mouth wide, then gripped Captain Lain's head in its jaws. Captain Lain's four limbs were still frantically struggling when… CRUNCH! The rotwolf bit through his head as if it was just a rotten tomato. His head transformed into a large glob of blood and gore.

One of the elite warriors of the outpost, a famous expert of Blackflag, had died a miserable death in the hands of this alpha wolf. This time, it wasn't just the irregulars who were panicking. Even the outpost guards were broken!

The alpha rotwolf still had that dagger plunged into its left eye, but it remained as savage and brutal as ever. It turned and then spat out that deadly green mist once more, this time with some brain matter and gore mixed into it. Quite a few people were within range of its attack, and agonized screams once more began to echo throughout the area.

One rotwolf after another began to charge out past it, leaping towards the humans. By now, none of the people present had any will to fight at all. Their sole source of support, Captain Lain, had perished. This meant that the battle here was destined to become a completely lopsided one, an absolute hell for the humans.

Chapter 20
A Near Escape

After Captain Lain was killed, his corpse was tossed by the alpha rotwolf to one side like garbage. Several of the other rotwolves charged forward to fight over the body, eventually tearing it into quite a few pieces.

It was a truly unimaginable sight. Just a short while ago, he was a hale and hearty warrior. Now, he had become nothing more than bits of blood, bone, and gore that had been scattered across the ground.

One could imagine how heavy a mental blow this was to Cloudhawk. More and more rotwolves were pouring in, and they were uniformly superb in every way; they were strong, they were fast, they were vicious, and they were clever. They were true killers! Soon, the entire defensive line had been breached in so many locations that it didn't even look like a military formation at all.

"Stop running. You won't be able to escape!" Cloudhawk could sense that everything was spiraling completely out of control. He called out frantically, "Fight them to the bitter end, otherwise all of us are gonna die!"

The humans still held an advantage in numbers. If they could band together, they wouldn't necessarily be defeated! Running was of no use; how could two legs possibly run faster than four?

Cloudhawk had already noticed that the sly, vicious rotwolves delighted in chasing down lone stragglers and individuals who were fleeing; pouncing strikes from behind seemed to have a high chance of success. Alas, nobody paid Cloudhawk any heed; they all continued to flee in terror, becoming nothing more than prey for the rotwolves.

By now, Cloudhawk could no longer see any hope at all. Gritting his teeth, he rose upwards and was about to charge towards one of the rotwolves. But right at this moment, a shrill screech rang out! A giant bat was dive-bombing towards Cloudhawk, and its eagle-like claws ripped straight towards Cloudhawk's face. If this strike landed, the claws would definitely tear through it as if it was parchment.

Alert to the danger, Cloudhawk immediately halted and began to back peddle, but the giant bat relentlessly pursued after him. Its two claws landed on Cloudhawk's shoulders, tearing through his skin and latching onto his flesh. The giant bat then began to flap its wings, hard; if it was able to once more fly into the skies, the terrifying power from its claws would at the very least rip two massive chunks of flesh from Cloudhawk's shoulders.

"Fuck off!" Cloudhawk let out a furious roar as he hacked the bat's left wing off with his sword, then slammed it to the ground. He held his shortsword in a reverse double-grip as he repeatedly stabbed downwards towards the bat's head. A large amount of foul blood came pouring out, and the bat quickly stopped moving after a few initial struggles.

The one-eyed alpha rotwolf turned its attention towards Cloudhawk, its attention instantly focused onto the unremarkable, half-grown boy. It bared its sharp fangs, blood and saliva slowly dripping out of its maw. Within the past minute, it had used those fangs to crunch and destroy at least six or seven heads. Now, it had located the eighth!

The alpha rotwolf flew into the air, moving with an explosive amount of speed that was completely at odds with its huge form. But just as the alpha rotwolf rose into the air to deliver its furious strike, Cloudhawk's alert senses warned him of the impending danger.

This thing had destroyed even Captain Lain! How could Cloudhawk possibly defeat such a savage beast?

The alpha rotwolf's mouth was already beginning to froth with its highly corrosive acid spit. However, it now had much less compared to the last two times it had used the spit. The alpha rotwolf was probably running low on its acid spit, or perhaps it felt like there was no need to use too much against such a weak target. It moved with incredible speed, kicking up a huge cloud of dirt behind it as it launched itself like an arrow at Cloudhawk.

Cloudhawk tossed his shortsword straight towards the alpha rotwolf while he threw himself sideways, but of course the toss was completely useless.

Cloudhawk could sense a fiery pain coming from his back as the massive bulk of the creature flew over him. Most likely, a few drops of saliva had dripped onto his back,

but it felt as though he had been dipped in strong acid. And this had been just a few drops! No wonder Captain Lain had almost instantly been crippled by a full-on blast of the creature's spit!

The alpha rotwolf turned with preternatural grace and speed, then once more leapt for Cloudhawk. The creature was too close! No matter how Cloudhawk dodged, there was no way he could possibly avoid this strike.

Cloudhawk knew very well that he would die as soon as he was knocked down; there would be no recovering from that at all. His head would be torn off and crunched like a melon, his body would be ripped into shreds, and his intestines would be dragged out. He would be transformed into a pile of gore and bloody mush!

I can't die here!

Cloudhawk thought back to the nightmare he had his first night in the outpost. He hadn't become powerful yet, hadn't escaped the wastelands yet, hadn't realized his dreams yet. How could he possibly accept such a meaningless, pathetic death? All these thoughts flashed through his mind in an instant.

A surge of insane courage suddenly flooded into Cloudhawk, and he reacted almost by instinct. If he was going to die, no matter what, then he was going to die fighting. His legs came to a sudden halt, the momentum of his earlier movements continuing to propel him forwards and causing his feet to 'skid' through the muddy ground. While fighting to maintain his balance, Cloudhawk pulled out that silver revolver from by his side with his right hand.

During the past month with the Tartarus mercenaries, Cloudhawk had often helped the mercenaries maintain their firearms. He had never, however, had the chance to use one himself. This was his very first time using a pistol… and yet, it felt so very familiar.

Cloudhawk felt as though his mind had reached out through his body and extended into the gun itself. He could clearly sense every tiny part and every molded line with perfect clarity, almost as though the revolver was part of his own body. It was like his eyes, his arms, or his legs; he was able to control it with absolute mastery.

Cloudhawk could clearly sense that his body was transforming. Every single pore in his body was tightening and contracting, and every single muscle group was moving in concert to prepare for this upcoming shot.

This was what it felt like to be a control metahuman. Control metahumans were able to perfectly control their bodies as well as any weapons they were wielding. These types of metahumans often preferred to use complicated technological weapons, such as various types of firearms. Thus far, the most powerful control metahuman which Cloudhawk had ever met was Slyfox. He was able to use those two modified pistols to hit bull's-eyes from a hundred meters away without even aiming.

Cloudhawk wasn't as formidable as Slyfox… but given how close the target was and how large it was, he felt certain he should be able to hit it! He had only one bullet. Everything rested on this shot!

Cloudhawk could clearly sense that when he raised his revolver and aimed it at the alpha rotwolf, the alpha rotwolf's body trembled slightly as it immediately began to adjust itself to avoid the shot.

As expected, this incredibly dangerous mutabeast possessed a keen sense of danger. However, Cloudhawk felt as though he could predict what the alpha rotwolf's response would be, and he immediately made some minute adjustments with the tip of his revolver to compensate.

The giant rotwolf could sense the invisible specter of death hanging over its head, causing it to feel fear for the first time. And yet, this feeling of fear further fueled the creature's savage aggression, and it let out an enraged howl as it leapt forwards.

Either it would die, or its prey would die!

This was a moment of life and death, but Cloudhawk actually became incredibly calm and focused. His fingers were steady as they gently closed around the trigger, and he could sense everything with perfect clarity, from the barrel of the gun to its handle, then to the fingers gripping the gun and the rest of his body.

He pulled the trigger of the gun, causing the hammer to fall down at high speeds and slam into the gunpowder behind the bullet. The gunpowder was successfully set alight, and the bullet's shell casing instantly expanded explosively, pushing the bullet out of the barrel at tremendous speeds!

CRACK! A single bullet flew out like flames from the barrel of the gun!

The bullet tore a path through the air… then hit the alpha rotwolf in its one remaining eye with incomprehensible accuracy. In slow-motion, the bullet shattered through its

cornea, bored through its vitreous, severed its optic nerves, and then smashed straight into the creature's brain, reducing the brain-matter inside its skull to a pile of mush.

Cloudhawk's skidding legs finally came to a halt, while the massive body of the alpha rotwolf came crashing to the ground in front of him. Its body was still twitching as what little consciousness it had left tried to will it to its feet, as though it wanted to leap up once more and tear Cloudhawk to shreds. Alas, there was no way it could ever rise again.

This took time to describe, but in reality it happened in an instant!

Cloudhawk stared in disbelief at the hill-sized corpse in front of him. He could hardly believe that he had actually slain this monster with his revolver. But before he even had a chance to savor the feeling of snatching life from the jaws of death, a feeling of incredible exhaustion overwhelmed him and caused him to slump downwards. It was as though he had poured all of his energy into that shot, and now he had nothing left.

With the alpha rotwolf dead, the other rotwolves began to let out mournful howls, and their frenzied morale seemed to take a sudden hit. However, this was nothing more than a temporary lull. Given how brutal these mutabeasts were, they wouldn't retreat even if their alpha perished. Instead, all of those oily green gazes turned to focus on the murderer who had just slain their alpha. Those dozens of ferocious glares were like dozens of swords that stabbed into Cloudhawk's heart.

Cloudhawk didn't even have the chance to catch his breath before the wolves began to move in unison. Dozens of the incredibly muscular rotwolves all began to charge towards a single target: Him! This was an incredible sight to behold. Cloudhawk was completely defenseless and had no weapons left, but even if he was both armed and as powerful as Mad Dog he still wouldn't be able to deal with dozens of rotwolves at the same time.

Cloudhawk began to run. He wanted to pick up his shortsword and fight back, because he didn't want to give up… but as soon as he started to run, a muscular rotwolf slammed into his back with the power of a sledgehammer, knocking him to the ground and sending him rolling through the mud. The rotwolf used its paws to keep him pressed down to the ground, then began to deliver a lethal bite to Cloudhawk's neck.

Cloudhawk really had reached the end of the line! He frantically tried to struggle, but was completely unable to overcome this beast's raw physical strength. He could smell

his own death from the rotwolf's open maw, and could already sense the rotwolf's sharp teeth tearing through his skin.

But right at this desperate moment, Cloudhawk suddenly heard a familiar roar ring out right next to him. A black silhouette had shot out at lightning speed, then barreled straight into the rotwolf and sent it flying. The black silhouette and the rotwolf began to tear and bite at each other on the ground, and in the end the black silhouette managed to tear the rotwolf's throat out. It was simply too fast for the rotwolves! It then transformed into a streak of black lightning as it threw itself towards yet another one of the rotwolves which was about to pounce upon Cloudhawk.

"WOOLA?!" This creature had always spent its time chasing after Cloudhawk and biting him in the posterior for amusement. Woola gorged itself on human meat and had an absolutely violent temper… and yet, for the first time Cloudhawk felt as though it was absolutely adorable.

It had to have been Slyfox or Mad Dog who had sent Woola over! Woola's senses were incredibly acute, allowing it to locate the missing Cloudhawk through scent alone. It really did appear right on time; if it had been just a second too slow, the only thing it would've found was Cloudhawk's corpse.

Although Woola was nothing more than a watchdog which the mercenaries had raised, it was even stronger in battle than Captain Lain. Its six legs gave it explosive speed when running, letting it move even faster than mutated panthers. As for its shark-like teeth, they were like death razors that could tear through even iron sheets with ease.

In a short while, it had killed four of the rotwolves!

Woola instantly drew the attention of many of the rotwolves, who realized that this savage beast was a danger and immediately began to surround and assault it. Although Woola was very powerful, there was no way it could possibly defeat so many of those savage rotwolves.

Cloudhawk picked up his fallen shortsword, then screamed at the surrounding men, "What the fuck are you guys staring at? Get over here and help!" But none of the men moved to intervene. None of them wanted to interfere in a fight between animals.

Woola was currently fighting at least five wolves at the same time, with many other wolves circling and prowling around him, biding their time. Woola's skin had already

been bit open in four or five places, and blood was flowing across its body. The situation was extremely dire.

Screw it. Time to go all out!

Cloudhawk disliked Woola. In fact, the two had never gotten along well at all, and the creature had bullied him nonstop in the mercenary base. And yet, Cloudhawk's way of thinking was quite simple; Woola had only fallen into such dire straits because it had come to rescue him. If Cloudhawk abandoned Woola and fled, not only would the other mercenaries scorn him, even Cloudhawk would look down upon himself!

Chapter 21
One Wave After Another

Cloudhawk lifted his shortsword up high, then charged straight into the fray! The people around him couldn't help but feel flabbergasted; was the kid mad? Not even outpost guards would necessarily be able to beat rotwolves in one-on-one combat. This kid was fourteen or fifteen years old, whereas there were ten rotwolves circling around Woola. For him to charge into the mix was tantamount to suicide!

Although the kid had been lucky enough to shoot and kill the alpha rotwolf, he didn't seem to be an especially skilled combatant. Two of the rotwolves noticed the human youth charging towards them, and they immediately leapt towards the arrogant, presumptuous creature.

This kid is dead! This was what everyone in the surrounding area was thinking.

Cloudhawk suddenly accelerated, shooting forwards like an arrow from a bow as he stabbed forwards with a double-handed blow. His shortsword stabbed straight into a rotwolf's flank, and he then raised his leg and kicked the rotwolf away from him. As the second rotwolf leapt towards him, Cloudhawk delivered a punch right to the rotwolf's head. His scrawny frame unleashed an entirely disproportionate amount of force as his punch actually smashed the rotwolf into the ground.

The rotwolf let out a few low yips as it immediately crawled to its feet, then slunk backwards. All of its hair was standing up straight, as though it had seen something that was utterly terrifying to it.

Both of Cloudhawk's eyes were blood-red, and his veins were bulging out from his body. He seemed to have transformed into a completely difference person, and no one could believe that the amount of speed, strength, and viciousness he had just put on display belonged to a youth.

It was happening again! That strange thing was happening again! The stone hanging around Cloudhawk's neck had once more turned scorchingly hot as the same thing which had happened all those nights ago began to occur once more. He seemed to have turned into a volcano, filled with fury, savagery, and violence. All sorts of destructive

thoughts were flooding through his mind as the will within the strange stone was once more unleashed!

Cloudhawk could sense that things were different this time. He was actually able to stay fairly calm, whereas on that night he had nearly gone completely insane!

The wolf pack seemed to sense something, and all of them began to hesitate and retreat. Woola seized this opportunity to regroup by Cloudhawk's side. Although his body was covered in wounds, he continued to roar savagely as he glared at the rotwolves. A half-grown youth and a highly mutated human… together, they had actually overawed and frightened a group of rotwolves!

But this wasn't to last. The reason why the rotwolves were hesitating was because they could sense that Cloudhawk's aura had changed. However, based on what they could see this human still didn't pose much of a threat to them. As more rotwolves leapt over the ramparts and replenished their ranks, the group instantly regained their morale.

"There's just too many of them. We can't beat them!" Cloudhawk could sense that the surge of power which the stone had given him was receding like the waters of the tide and disappearing at high speed. He immediately said to Woola, "Run!" Woola just growled in response; it was unclear if he even understood what Cloudhawk was saying.

Cloudhawk knew that given his current speed, it would be very difficult for him to outrun the rotwolves. The rotwolves had hesitated for a few seconds, but now they once more charged straight towards him… but right at this moment, the sound of an engine revving could be heard directly behind him.

Multiple riders appeared within his field of vision, and in front of them was a wastelander-retrofitted motorcycle. As for the others, they were riding on giant lizards or bigfoot birds, and they all wielded heavy hacking machetes. They charged over at high speeds, slamming into the line of attacking rotwolves and knocking several of them flying.

A lucky survivor cried out in surprise and delight, "An elite squad!"

This was a squad of the most elite and best-trained guards in the entire outpost, with every single member being a top-tier expert. The deceased Captain Lain had been a member of this elite squad, and the man known as 'Grizzly' was one of the squad

captains.

The leader of the mounted riders, however, was not Grizzly. Instead, it was a short-haired, energetic youth whose name was 'Wulf'. He was the second captain of the elite squad, and definitely one of the most skilled experts in the outpost.

"What the hell happened here?!" Wulf scanned the surrounding area. The first thing which drew his attention was the corpse of the alpha rotwolf on the ground. Next, he stared at Cloudhawk with a rather strange look in his eyes, followed by a glance at Woola. Clearly, he recognized Woola. "You belong to Tartarus? Did you kill this alpha wolf? And where the hell is that idiot Lain?!"

Cloudhawk had yet to recover from his state of shock. He nodded almost instinctively and said, "He's spread across the ground. I'm not sure which chunk belongs to him!" These were completely innocent words, but to the elite squad it sounded rather mocking. The Tartarus mercenaries were all quite formidable, and they had often tussled and competed against the elite squad.

Lain was Wulf's subordinate, but had been slain. This young mercenary, however, had survived. How could Wulf possibly smile upon hearing this news? He let out a snort, a cold look on his face!

Right at this moment, a rotwolf began to slink towards them, hoping to launch a sneak attack. Wulf threw his knife out, sending it piercing through the rotwolf and pinning it to the ground. He then hopped off the wastelands motorcycle in a rather crude way, then swooped past the corpse of the rotwolf like an eagle, using his feet to help him tug out the knife. Then, a wind of flashing, electric blades began to blow through the rotwolf, cutting through every part of it as easily as cutting vegetables.

What an impressive weapon and skill! Was this the power of one of the elite captains?

The other elite squads joined the fray as well. One particularly strong man grabbed a rotwolf by its jaws, using his raw power to resist the rotwolf's biting power, then forcibly tore the rotwolf apart from the mouth with his bare hands. He then casually tossed the rotwolf's corpse to one side like garbage. The ordinary members of the elite squads were all as strong as Lain had been!

The rotwolf pack had first lost its alpha, then had been driven back repeatedly by the elite squad's attacks. Only ten or so were remaining, and they turned and fled with

their tails behind their legs.

“All clear!” Elite Captain Wulf was in no mood to piece together and collect Lain’s corpse. “Let’s go reinforce the other areas!” The elite squad departed.

Cloudhawk’s life had been saved. He stared at the devastated battlefield, then let out a long breath. The price they had paid for victory here had been an enormous one. Suddenly, Cloudhawk noticed that Woola was sniffing around one of the corpses and pawing at it. “Woola, what are you doing?!”

Woola quickly found the object it was looking for. It returned, holding a blood and gore-splattered shotgun in its mouth which it delivered to Cloudhawk. The shotgun had been badly corroded, but it was probably still serviceable. Cloudhawk was delighted by this discovery and began to search the area as well, only to discover a number of shotgun shells in one of the pouches worn by an outpost guard.

Perfect! He never would’ve imagined that he would win such a great prize from this melee.

A few dozen lucky survivors stood nearby, rather odd looks in their eyes. They stared unblinkingly at the shotgun in Cloudhawk’s hands, unable to disguise their greed and envy.

“And what the hell do you think you are looking at?!” Cloudhawk slung the shotgun over his back, then pulled out his revolver and waved it a few times, a savage expression on his face. “Y’all better pretend you saw nothing! If you say a word, I’ll waste your sorry asses with my bullets!” Woola very obligingly let out a growl of support as well.

After having spent so much time with the mercenaries, Cloudhawk had unconsciously begun to pick up their manner of talking. In this era, talking reason was absolutely meaningless. The most effective method was to issue naked threats.

By now, no one dared to underestimate the skinny little kid. The way he had shot and killed the alpha rotwolf with a single bullet had stunned everyone present. Without question, all of these people viewed this young kid, seemingly thirteen or fourteen years old, as an extremely powerful expert. They wouldn’t be so foolish as to try and steal something from someone so powerful. That would be suicide! And of course, Woola was a legendarily ferocious creature that everyone in Blackflag Outpost knew

about!

Cloudhawk had been bullied by others all his life. Back in the ruins, the scar-faced man had bullied him; here in the outpost, both the mercenaries and the red-nosed innkeeper had bullied him. Now, when he saw the looks of fear in the eyes of those around him, he felt a strange feeling in his heart.

Holy shit. Bullying others is really fun!

Blackflag Outpost's walls had been breached in six or seven places, and roughly three or four hundred rotwolves had charged inside. The battle persisted for two more hours, and more than half of the rotwolves were injured or killed before they were finally beaten back. As for the giant bats, they left after eating their fill at this 'feast'.

The outpost had suffered extremely heavy losses due to this beast wave. It suffered more than 1500 casualties, the vast majority of whom were active, able-bodied fighters. More than a hundred of the outpost guards had been wiped out as well. Clearly, the overall power of Blackflag Outpost had suffered quite a bit.

Nobody dared to relax or to stop being vigilant. Who knew if the crafty rotwolves might decide to launch a sudden second attack? As a result, that very night they cleared the battlefield and began to repair the breached ramparts.

This battle truly had not been worth it. Rotwolf corpses were worth almost nothing, aside from the fur which could be used to make warm clothes. All their other parts were completely useless! Rotwolf meat was completely inedible; not only was it highly sour and reeked of decay, it was also poisonous. Blackflag Outpost had paid an enormous price to win this battle, but there were no spoils to be shared at all.

Cloudhawk huffed and puffed as he ran over to the Tartarus mercenaries. Slyfox took a long, hard puff on his cigarette, blew out a cloud of smoke, then let loose a verbal barrage. "Fuck, where the fuck were you hiding? I thought you were dead, son! Oho, and it looks like you picked up a little something as well."

Cloudhawk's shotgun had attracted the attention of the mercenaries. Only a few of these weapons existed in the outpost. Without a doubt, the kid had picked it up somewhere on the battlefield. Judging from the wounds over his body, the kid had unquestionably been in a bloody battle of his own.

The Tartarus company had lost two people as well. They were one of the most elite

squads of Blackflag Outpost, and so the loss of 'just' two people would have a significant impact on the outpost on a whole. Mad Dog and Slyfox were both drenched in blood; clearly, the two had been in an extremely vicious battle as well. But now, the dust had finally settled. It was over.

Cloudhawk stared towards the pearly-white clouds in the eastern skies. "Has the beast wave ended?"

"It's almost dawn." Slyfox seemed to be in a rather foul mood. He had lost several subordinates, after all. "Rotwolves never fight in broad daylight. We've endured this wave, at least."

Wonderful!

The rosy light of the rising sun slowly began to appear, bringing peace and calm back to the world. Everyone had battled for an entire night, and they were all completely exhausted. But just as they were all preparing to retire for some rest, something completely unexpected happened. Yet another black mass appeared off in the distance as a large group of unknown creatures began to move towards the direction of Blackflag Outpost.

"Hey. HEY! Are you sure about what you said?" Cloudhawk called out hurriedly, "Didn't you say the rotwolves wouldn't come back?"

"No way." A completely befuddled look was on Slyfox's face. There was no way his past experiences could've misled him. Rotwolves never launched large-scale attacks during the day!

One of the mercenaries used a pair of binoculars to stare off into the distance. Moments later, he called out loudly, "Those aren't rotwolves!"

Not rotwolves? What were they then?! Slowly, the silhouettes of the creatures became clearer as they moved in from the desert wastelands. It really didn't look like a beast wave! Judging from their speed and the amount of sand they kicked up, they seemed like… a motorcade? One that was advancing at high speeds.

"Oh my God."

"That's a sweeper battalion!"

Someone began to scream in shock, and the faces of Slyfox, Mad Dog, and the other mercenaries instantly tightened. “FUCK! Were those motherfuckers waiting this entire time for the right moment?” Mad Dog immediately rose to his feet. “Blackflag Outpost was weakened by last night’s beast wave. Now these fuckers are attacking, right on cue. These fuckers really are smart, I have to give them that!”

Cloudhawk had no idea what was about to happen. However, judging from the faces of the outpost guards and the mercenaries, the situation was even grimmer than when they faced a beast wave last night. In fact… it seemed as though this would become a true life-and-death battle.

What was going on? One wave of problems after another… when would it end?!

Chapter 22
The Sweeper Battalion

The morning sun slowly rose higher and higher, unleashing its scalding heat upon the world. The light of the sun spread across the desert wastelands, kissing the faces of the Blackflag Outpost warriors and bathing them in fiery, blood-like light. Even when the light of the sun grew so bright that the outpost guards could barely see, they still continued to squint and stare as the battalion moved closer and closer to them.

They were the true predators of the deserts, the locusts of the wastelands, the most terrifying and notorious beings these barren lands had to offer!

Sweepers delighted in roving about the wastes and attacking caravans and units, but usually they never dared to launch direct attacks against bases as large as Blackflag Outpost. Blackflag Outpost had a population of more than ten thousand, after all, and it had thousands of able-bodied men. Without a doubt, it was a tough bone to chew for any sweeper unit.

But things were different right now. The disastrous beast wave had just come to an end, resulting in multiple breaches of the barricades and heavy casualties to the outpost defenders, all of whom were exhausted. This was as weak as Blackflag Outpost had ever been. If a sweeper battalion was determined to destroy Blackflag Outpost, this really was the most perfect opportunity.

Even figures like Mad Dog and Slyfox had heavy looks on their faces. A sweeper battalion was every bit as dangerous as a beast wave, but there was a difference. Beast waves might be savage, but in the end they were nothing more than a pack of foolish animals. Sweeper battalions, however, were formed by human mutants.

Mutants weren't necessarily stupid. Some of them were quite intelligent, and the smart ones would often be given leadership roles. They would help forge armor, craft weapons, tame beasts, drive vehicles, or even operate firearms. Sweeper battalions had their own military tactics. They understood the principles of reinforcement and they could analyze for weaknesses. Dealing with them was completely different from dealing with beast waves!

“Listen up, rookies. Don’t do a single damn thing without orders.” Slyfox slowly began to load bullets into his pistols. “I’ve never heard of such a large sweeper battalion operating in this area. There’s somethin’ seriously fishy going on here.”

In this age, ultraviolet radiation was so heavy it could virtually cause blindness. Cloudhawk forced himself to keep his eyes open as he stared at the impending battalion. He couldn’t tell how many people were in it, but he could tell that this was indeed a large force.

Cloudhawk suddenly trembled. He could somehow hear a strange sound ringing out from far away. He wouldn’t be able to describe this sound to anyone; it wasn’t something he heard with his ears. Rather, he was ‘hearing’ it with some other type of extrasensory perception. It was as though an invisible guitar string was in the air in front of him, and when the wind blew it plucked the string, creating a thrumming sound.

What in the world was that sound? Why did it seem so familiar? Cloudhawk couldn’t help but think of the similar, strange feeling he had experienced in that underground passageway. He had followed that strange sensation until in the end he had found the strange stone he now wore around his neck. Did these sweepers have equipment similar to his stone? That was impossible, right?

Mad Dog saw Cloudhawk’s face turn pale, and he squeezed a grin onto his hideously scarred face as he spun his snow-white machetes in the air. “If you are afraid, kid, you can hide behind me. Rookies like you aren’t equipped to deal with foes like them.”

“Fuck that! When have I ever been afraid!” Cloudhawk had fought by Mad Dog’s side in that inn, and so he was able to say this without any reservations. However, a solemn look then appeared on his face. “But I have the feeling that we shouldn’t be in a hurry. Let’s not be the first to act.”

Cloudhawk didn’t try to explain the strange feeling he had. If he did, the mercenaries would probably just think that he was going mad. However, Cloudhawk really could feel some sort of energy blowing towards them like dandelions on the wind. The strange energy had already surrounded the area around their base, and he had a very bad feeling that something was about to happen to them. This type of feeling, a sensation of mortal danger, was almost never wrong!

Slyfox also had the feeling that being in the vanguard was a bad decision. He

immediately ordered the mercenaries to withdraw slightly. The outpost guards and the elite squads could form the front lines; there was no need for the Tartarus mercenaries to fight with them over that 'honor'.

The dozens of Tartarus mercenaries fell back by a few dozen meters. Right at this moment, a powerful tempest suddenly arose, sweeping up all the pebbles and sands on the streets. It was like a small sandstorm had suddenly attacked the outpost, causing all of outpost guards who had been readying themselves for combat to be caught offguard.

"Goddamnit!"

"Why is there wind?!"

"Not good. I've got no vision!"

Although the weather in the wastelands was always bad, the timing of this minor sandstorm was a bit too suspicious. Everyone's field of vision was completely blocked off, making it impossible for them to see what maneuvers their enemies were carrying out. As for the sweeper battalion, it picked up the pace. The ground began to tremble, while the stones on the streets began to rattle like drops of oil and water in the frying pan. Everyone could sense that the danger was drawing closer and closer.

"They're here!"

"Careful, careful!"

The multiple ferocious and heavily modified trucks slammed into the city barricades like giant battering rams! Thud. Thud. THUD! The enormous heavy trucks rammed into the barricades, causing earth-shaking explosion sounds. The stacked sand bags and heavy boulders were sent tumbling downwards by the force of the great collisions. Quite a few of the trucks rammed straight through the barricades, bowling over and crushing quite a few of the sand-blinded guardsmen who were caught offguard.

Every single vehicle was bristling with sharp spikes. When they drove past the guards, they were like meat grinders that kicked up a storm of bloody rain. The outpost guards began to howl miserably as they fell to the ground, with some being impaled onto the spikes of the vehicles.

“Damn them.” Captain Grizzly of the elite squad roared furiously, “Retreat!” But alas, the sandstorm made it so that his voice simply could not carry. Right at this moment, a number of these crude vehicles slammed into each other, causing the deaths of at least twenty warriors. The vehicles then reverse a few meters before slamming into the walls anew, causing the nearly complete destruction of the outside perimeter of the outpost.

The wind turned inwards, bringing with it the sound of hoofsteps which rang out like raindrops in a storm. Ten or so scale-covered, twin-horned mutabeasts which were shaped almost like bulls were being driven into the outpost. Every single one of these mutabeasts was covered with ugly plates of iron armor. The iron plates not only provided them with protection, they even had razors and spikes fixed onto them.

The eyes of the mutated bulls were covered by swathes of black cloth, preventing them from seeing where they were going, while their tails had been set alight. The blazing fire behind them caused them to completely lose control, and they charged straight into the masses of guards within the outpost.

The outpost guards were sent flying, one after the other, with some being gored to death and others being trampled to death. These wild beasts were simply overwhelmingly strong, and they also had those iron plates for protection. There was no way that any of the ordinary base guards could stop them at all. Within just a few short minutes, the bodies of the mutant bulls were stained with blood and gore, with the outpost defenses in a state of complete chaos.

“Kill those things!” Ten or so outpost guards howled angrily as they charged forwards in unison towards one of the wild bulls. The wild bull first knocked two of them flying, gored a third, then lifted its hooves up and trampled down a fourth while the sharp spikes on its body tore into the chest of a fifth. As for the attacks of the guards, they didn’t seem to have much of an impact at all. In the end, Captain Grizzly had to personally intervene. He severed the bull’s neck with one chop from his saber, and only then was the maddened beast’s rampage brought to an end.

That wild rush from the ten or so mutant bulls wasn’t enough to actually defeat the outpost, but they did have a major impact on the outpost’s defenses. By now, the sandstorm had already come to a halt. The sweepers had been given more than enough time to penetrate the outpost, and so all the soldiers were forced to fall back to their second line of defense.

When Slyfox saw the haggard state of the defenders, the fat on his face jiggled a bit as he laughed. “Fuck me, good thing we withdrew. Otherwise, those fuckers would’ve gored us in our asses as well.”

“This isn’t the time to revel in their misfortunes!” Cloudhawk was truly rendered speechless by this damn fatso. “We’re in really bad shape right now!”

There were even more sweepers than they had originally predicted, with more than ten of those retrofitted heavy trucks. They even had two giant supply trucks behind the attack trucks, as well as several dozen wastelands motorocycles, several dozen giant riding lizards, and many bigfoot birds.

How many sweepers were there? There had to be at least three or four hundred… and this was a conservative estimate!

Cloudhawk knew that combat power had nothing to do with raw numbers. These sweepers were all brutal, ferocious mutants who had joined together to wreak havoc upon the world en masse. Compared to ordinary sweepers, they had better weapons, were more powerful, and were far more fearsome opponents!

It was incredibly rare for a battalion of more than three or four hundred sweepers to appear within a few hundred kilometers of this reach. A battalion like this was completely capable of laying siege to an outpost with a population of around ten thousand… and they had appeared at just the right moment, when the strength and morale of the outpost had yet to recover.

Now, they had been able to breach the outer perimeter of Blackflag Outpost without even needing to fight.

The two sides were roughly three hundred meters away from each other. One strange, bizarre-looking mutant after another came into view. More than eighty percent of these sweepers were highly mutated mutants, with twenty percent being moderately mutated mutants.

There were around ten or so mutants who were particularly striking. They had ugly faces and were of differing sizes, but all of them were at least three meters tall and about four times as bulky as an ordinary human being. Cloudhawk wouldn’t believe that mutants like this could exist if it wasn’t for the fact that he was seeing them with his own eyes! These creatures didn’t look like humans at all; they were nothing more

than vertically-walking behemoths!

But if you thought that the only advantage these behemoths held was their great size, you would be completely wrong. Their chests, arms, and thighs were completely covered in steel plates, and their weapons were giant warhammers that weighed more than two hundred kilograms. These weren't human beings at all; they were walking, steel-clad mobile fortresses!

In the wastelands these giant mutants were generally referred to as 'maneaters'. Maneaters possessed incomprehensible amounts of strength, and when they used those enormous warhammers they could cave in even armored vehicles with their blows. A single ordinary maneater would be able to effortlessly dominate a squad of over ten outpost guards… but the ten-plus maneaters here were all armed to the teeth! They would definitely pose an enormous threat to Blackflag Outpost!

Clank! Clank! Right at this moment, yet another large group of highly mutated sweepers appeared, and they lined up neatly behind the maneaters.

These sweepers weren't as terrifyingly large as the maneaters, but they were still twice as bulky and muscular as ordinary men and roughly two meters tall. They were fully outfitted with self-manufactured sets of metal armor and helmets, and they held steel shields with their left arms and heavy war-axes with their right.

These creatures were known as sweeper 'thugs' and they served as the medium infantry for sweeper battalions! Only one in every ten sweepers was chosen to become a thug, and thus they were all particularly fierce figures. They were dressed in heavy metal helmets and thick metal cuirasses, making them look almost like giant metal cans. As for their heavy war-axes, those things were able to lop off limbs as easily as one might pluck a flower.

The rest of the sweepers weren't outfitted in such an orderly fashion, but they were still quite well-equipped for a wastelands army. Some had sabers, some had warhammers, some rode giant lizards, and some drove vehicles.

Thirty or so comparatively short mutants were particularly eye-catching. These mutants had only been moderately mutated, and it was possible to tell that they were once human. Most of them were equipped with longbows, firearms, and other long-distance weapons.

Cloudhawk felt as though he had seen a ghost. How the hell was it possible for sweepers to be equipped with firearms?!

They had heavy shock troopers, medium infantry, riders, archers, formations, combat tactics, and complete sets of weapons and gear. In the wastelands, this was essentially a proper army!

Chapter 23
Crushed

Four hundred fully equipped sweepers was a force capable of roaming through the wastelands with impunity, easily capable of crushing any foolish opponent who dared to stand before them. Blackflag Outpost's situation was far more dire than it had been just a night ago when it had faced a beast wave.

In comparison, the outpost warriors were individually inferior to the mutant sweepers in every single aspect, and they were exhausted besides. Many of the outpost warriors were wounded as well. How were they supposed to win this fight?

But what Cloudhawk feared wasn't the sweepers. In the entire outpost, he was the only person who knew for a fact that the earlier sandstorm did not arise by coincidence. It was created by someone or something using a unique weapon.

Cloudhawk couldn't imagine, wouldn't dare imagine, what type of object would possess such incredible, supernatural power. Humans always felt fear in the face of the inexplicable and the unknown, and Cloudhawk was no exception. He felt certain that the sweepers definitely had an unfathomably powerful backer standing behind them.

The two sides faced off against each other from a distance of one or two hundred meters. The sweepers didn't seem to be in a hurry to attack.

A figure completely wrapped in a ragged, tattered cloak suddenly emerged from one of the sweeper vehicles. A large hood covered his entire head, making it impossible to see what it looked like. However, when compared to the bloodthirsty, violent, and restless mutants this man seemed almost strangely still, so still that his chest didn't seem to rise and fall as he breathed. If he just stood there without walking, everyone would've taken him to be a cloak-clad statue!

Cloudhawk noticed something quite interesting. Even the savage and terrifyingly strong maneaters nudged backwards as this mysterious man walked past them, voluntarily clearing the way for him. It was as though they were afraid they would get in his way.

These giant creatures had long ago lost virtually all of their reason and intellect. Despite that, they could still tell the strong from the weak and tell who was a worthy, powerful leader. Above all else, they knew exactly what sort of a price they would pay if they tried to rebel against their leader.

Their minds had already been imprinted with memories of what punishments awaited rebels… and the imprinting had been done in the most simple, direct, and brutal way possible. This was why they almost instinctively shied away from the man!

The battle had come to a sudden halt, as though everything had fallen into a quagmire. Things were incredibly tense, and everyone was on tenterhooks. The outpost warriors were very careful not to even breathe too loudly, for fear that the slightest of stimuli would disrupt this fragile, delicate balance.

The cloaked figure slowly advanced towards the front, step by step. As he did, Cloudhawk stared unblinkingly at this man, trying to figure out what made him so different. And yet, no matter how hard he tried Cloudhawk was still unable to discern any of those strange ripples emanating from the man. It wasn't him!

This was an army of sweepers that was outfitted with metal armor, heavy machinery, machetes and war-axes, bows and firearms, and even vehicles. They literally were armed to the teeth. There was no way an army like this would've just suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Why was it that they had never heard of such an organization in the past?

The two captains of the elite outpost guards were all extremely puzzled. Why hadn't the sweepers pressed the attack after they had breached the outer perimeter? They were just standing there, giving the beleaguered defenders time to catch their breaths. Why did they do this? Did they feel overwhelmingly confident in their superiority? Were they waiting for something? Or were they worried about something?

The bows were all nocked. The guns were all loaded. It didn't matter what the sweepers were planning; the outpost warriors had once more reformed a strong defensive perimeter. However, they all knew that the outpost held no advantages at all in this battle. If they truly did begin to fight, the majority of the humans would be wiped out at the very least, even if they won. In a worst-case scenario, the entire outpost would be baptized in blood!

Morale was so heavy that everyone found it hard to even breathe. As for the cloaked,

statue-like figure, he moved slightly, raising his head and revealing the paper-white face beneath the hood. His skin looked as lifeless as an alabaster statue's, but his eyes were as black as the endless depths of the night. When he 'blinked', his eyelids didn't actually move; rather, some sort of dark-red nictitating membrane rapidly closed over his eyeballs. It was extremely bizarre to behold.

The mysterious man extended his hand and pointed at the outpost. "This outpost belongs to us now." His words were very calm and casual, as though he had come to a fairly simple decision. It was like he was proclaiming that he was going to eat a piece of bread, or perhaps pluck a flower from the roadside. His voice was shrill and dark, carrying a strange, mutated, sinister cadence to it.

The outpost defenders all had rather ugly looks on their faces when they heard his proclamation. The mysterious man continued: "Surrender!"

A strange look appeared on Cloudhawk's face as well. Weren't sweepers supposed to be nothing more than thuggish butchers who swept across the wastelands like locusts? Why did this sweeper desire to take over this outpost? This was too weird!

But of course, there was no way anyone would accede to this request. Those enormous maneaters would be able to eat an entire human being with each meal. They wouldn't even spare the bones. Not even the greatest of fools would volunteer to become food for sweepers!

Faced with this obvious provocation, a skinny youth rose to his feet and stepped forwards. It was the second captain of the elite squad, the man known as Wulf. His eyes were spitting fire as he said, "You want it? Come and take it, if you have any balls!" The other outpost guards supported him with a chorus of jeers and curses.

They weren't actually angered by the fellow's arrogant demeanor. Rather, this was the only method they had to bolster the cratering morale of their fellow warriors.

"Then I guess there's nothing else for it." The cloaked figure gently raised his hand, his every movement seeming extremely casual. It was like he was waving and saying good morning to a neighbor… but before making the final decision, he swept a glance at the surrounding area, almost as though he was waiting for something.

The mysterious man scanned the area, then hesitated for a few seconds as though something he was waiting for had yet to show itself. A look of disappointment

flickered through his eyes, and his voice echoed clearly in the ears of every man present like ice, filled with a cold promise of death. “Fine then. We’ll just wipe you all out!”

Such a casual statement. Such a direct statement. It didn’t even sound like he viewed this as a particularly onerous task; he said these words as though he was telling someone to drink a cup of water. It was a simple order, but one which was completely uncontestable. Perhaps to this mysterious sweeper, these outpost warriors were nothing more than bugs which he could crush with a wave of his hands!

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!” The sweepers had been waiting impatiently for just this command!

The ten-plus maneaters began to advance at a jog, while the hundred-plus thugs immediately followed right behind them. The crude, ugly, yet extremely thick armor they wore emitted clanking, grating sounds. They were like one of those ancient, rusting trains from the Old Times. With each step they took, they caused the ground in front of them to tremble. They were both tenacious and strong, and any men who stood in front of them were destined to be smashed to bits of blood and gore.

The warriors of Blackflag Outpost had shocked and horrified looks on their faces. The battle had started, just like that? They had thought the face-off would last a bit longer, giving them enough time to replenish their arrows and their ammunition. Who would’ve thought that the damnable sweeper battalion would launch an immediate attack without even brooking the slightest delay?

Grizzly roared loudly, “Archers and gunners, fire!” The warriors of the outpost began to fire their guns and shoot with their bows, but their formation was so chaotic that there was no way for them to concentrate their firepower.

The ten-plus enormous maneaters lifted up their arms, using their bracers to protect their eyes. The thick steel cuirasses covering their body was more than enough to protect their vitals, making it impossible for these ordinary arrows and bullets to deal any lethal wounds to them.

“Careful! They are coming!”

The enormous freaks barreled straight into the defenders with absolutely astonishing momentum. Each of the maneaters wielded enormous greathammers that weighed

several hundred kilograms, but whirled them with such ease it was as though they were playing with wooden sticks. They raised those ponderous warhammers up high, then sent them smashing downwards towards the humans with enough power to pulverize a herd of bulls.

CRUNCH! Two men were struck head-on, and their bodies disintegrated as if they were made out of glass, sending blood and gore everywhere!

When a few of the strikes missed and slammed into the ground, they seemed to cause the earth itself to quaver. Some of the more distant men felt their legs wobble along with the earth, while entire groups of nearby defenders were actually knocked to the ground by the overwhelmingly powerful shockwaves generated by the strikes. The still-standing outpost warriors tried to stab the maneaters with their spears, but even when they were able to strike through the chinks in the armor they were unable to pierce through that tough maneater skin.

With every swipe from a maneater warhammer, multiple humans were blasted off into the distance like tennis balls. One, two, three, four… the enormous monstrosities continued their berserk advance, their thick steel armor rendering them impervious to almost all attacks. Their whirling warhammers smashed every single human they came in contact with into a pile of pulped meat.

Next to every single massive maneater was an entire group of axe-wielding thugs, who ringed the maneaters with walls of iron shields. Although these thugs didn't have the astonishing size and power of the maneaters, they were still some of the most elite warriors the sweepers had to offer. All of them were nearly two meters tall and were twice as muscular as ordinary humans. With their left hands they held iron shields that seemed capable of stopping any attacks, and with their right hands they wielded war-axes that chopped through human bodies like vegetables.

Behind the thugs were the groups of bow and gun-wielding moderately mutated sweepers. These mutants didn't have the close combat power of the first two, but they were much more intelligent and so were responsible for using firearms to kill from a distance as well as screening their allies. They were responsible for killing particularly dangerous targets with their firearms.

Sweeper bows were custom-designed and specially made. Every single shot carried enormous amounts of power, and they were terrifyingly accurate. They were able to completely pierce through a man's skull, virtually guaranteeing that almost no one hit

by them would survive.

As for the lizard riders, the bikers, and the other riders, they wielded sickles and other long weapons and were responsible for keeping the flanks secure.

This was an extremely powerful and extremely well-organized formation. A sweeper battalion like this was unquestionably powerful, and would guarantee that they would overwhelmingly dominate almost any opponent. These outpost warriors stood no chance at all!

The outpost warriors let out screams as they died, and their screams intermingled with the sounds of their bones being shattered and their bodies being crushed, as well as the twanging of bowstrings and the cracks of firearms. These sounds all mixed together, coming together to form a strange, horrifying melody which none of the people present would ever be able to forget. This was a sea of terror that could drown the hearts of even the stoutest warriors, causing their courage to crumble and disappear.

By now, Cloudhawk had seen death and misery up close on many occasions. He could tell that the difference in power between the two sides was simply enormous; even if all of the outpost warriors fought to the bitter end, it still wouldn't be enough. For them, resistance was completely futile and meaningless.

The sweepers continued to attack without mercy, crushing all hope and bringing despair in their wake. These two forces were on completely different levels of skill and power, and this battle was ten times more calamitous than the previous one against the beast wave had been!

As for the cloaked, mysterious man, he just watched silently as the slaughter proceeded in front of him. It was like he was watching a piece of performance art after a fine meal, and he didn't seem inclined to take part in this battle at all.

Cloudhawk had the strange feeling that this fellow was more dangerous than ten maneaters combined. Even experts like Mad Dog and Slyfox were far from being a match for someone like him. The only reason this mysterious man wasn't taking part in the battle was simply because there was no need.

How was this battle going to end? What should Blackflag Outpost's response be? Cloudhawk didn't know the answers to this question, but he was once more reminded

that this was the sad lot of the weak. Faced with this nightmare, there wasn't a single thing he could do.

Chapter 24
Entering the Fray

Charge! Smash! Charge again! Smash again!

The maneaters swept their giant warhammers through the ranks of the defenders, causing absolute carnage. Each swing launched a wave of blood and gore, sending unrecognizably mangled bits of bone and flesh across the battlefield.

The sweeper thugs held their iron shields high, maintaining that steel shieldwall as their great war-axes hacked down one warrior after another like scythes through wheat. As for the sweeper cavalry on the two sides, they moved to circle behind the outpost defenders and attack from the two wings, pressuring them on their sides. The sweeper archers and gunners sent out continuous, long-distance volleys to maintain control over the battlefield.

The number of sweepers was fairly low, but they were completely crushing the outpost warriors on the battlefield. Compared to these powerful mutants, the human guards had no advantages at all in this fight.

Cloudhawk lifted up his weapon, preparing to charge out to the aid of the beleaguered soldiers around him. As the saying goes, no eggs survive when the nest is destroyed. The outpost warriors were suffering horrendous casualties. Even if they managed to survive in the end, what good would a ruined outpost be to them?

“Don’t be so impatient, kid.” Slyfox slapped a meaty hand on Cloudhawk’s shoulders, holding him back. The stone-faced Mad Dog spoke out in agreement: “Luck isn’t the only reason why Blackflag Outpost has been around for so long. The outpost has plenty of expert fighters, and the dozens of elite guards haven’t made their move yet either. Why the hell are you rushing to your death?”

Cloudhawk didn’t really understand what these two mercenary captains were thinking. The sweepers were smashing through their allies like rotting wood, and the outpost had suffered hundreds of casualties in just a few short minutes. Were they seriously supposed to hold back at a time like this?

One of the sweeper thugs lopped off the head of a guard with his war-axe. Just as he turned to seek out a new target, an incredibly muscular figure came charging straight towards him at incredible speeds. The muscular figure didn't move to disguise his intent and wasted no time at all. He charged over, cocked his arm, clenched his fist, then delivered a punch!

The sweeper thug was a veteran of over a hundred battles, and he immediately lifted up his metal shield to block. The shield was made out of pure metal; not even an ordinary bullet would necessarily be able to pierce through it. There was no way it would be pierced through by a punch, right?

CLANG! It was like a giant warhammer had slammed into his shield, with a large indent appearing at the point of impact! The sweeper thug was sent stumbling backwards as though he had been struck by a thunderbolt. One step, two steps, three steps… he staggered backwards by three steps before regaining his footing. The sweeper thug let out a furious roar, his iron boots digging into the ground as he used them to 'nail' himself into the ground. He then struck out with the great war-axe in his right hand, sending it sweeping forwards in a heavy counter-attack.

The muscular man in front of the sweeper thug delivered another punch! Sparks danced across the blade of the war-axe as it began to crack apart, then flew out of the sweeper thug's hand! Even the thug's fingers had been broken from this collision. Finally, the sweeper revealed a look of utter terror.

A third punch came straight for him! It was as fast as a ghost and had the power of a thunderbolt! The sweeper thug was actually knocked into the air, his metal chest-plate caved in and his ribs completely snapped. Even his heart had been heavily damaged by the power of this blow. This was no mere 'punch', it was like being slammed into by a freight train!

"Oho!" The mysterious man turned to glance at the newcomer with some degree of interest. This tall, muscular man was none other than one of the captains of Blackflag Outpost's elite guards… Grizzly!

Grizzly wore a pair of heavy steel boxing gloves over his hands. In terms of raw power, he was probably every bit the equal of Mad Dog. After finishing off the sweeper thug with three quick blows, he turned and chose a tall, hulking maneater as his next target.

The maneater could sense Grizzly's animosity and the danger he posed. The maneater

pulled his great warhammer from a heap of mangled flesh, then swept it towards Grizzly with such power that it generated a stinging wind, sending chunks of blood and gore splattering over Grizzly's body.

This was a furious attack with an insane amount of power behind it, but Grizzly did not retreat. He stepped forward, welcoming the rain of blood. As he sidestepped the heavy blow, he delivered a sudden punch to the maneater's kneecap, shattering it into tiny bits. Next, he used one leg to step onto the warhammer, pressing it even further into the ground and preventing the maneater from lifting it back up, then used his other leg to deliver a powerful kick to the maneater's thick, muscled arm. CRACK! The maneater's right arm was instantly broken by the power of this kick.

Grizzly flexed his legs, leaping high into the air as he delivered a punch to the maneater's jaw. Not even the maneater's helmet was able to stop Grizzly's furious, ferocious power. Even the maneater's lower teeth were shattered as its enormous form fell backwards, stunned. The maneater let out an enraged, agonized howl as it sought to rise once more, but a foot came crashing down upon its chest and sent it right back down again.

Arm cocked. Fist clenched. Punch! Grizzly's right hand completely smashed the maneater's ugly face apart. This hammer-like blow was so heavy that the maneater's face was reduced to a pile of completely unrecognizable mush.

Finally, one of the terrifying monstrosities had been destroyed. As expected, the elite captains possessed incredible power! His display of explosive strength and supernatural agility instantly boosted the flagging morale of the outpost defenders.

Grizzly was panting slightly. This sort of blitzkrieg offense was overwhelmingly powerful yet hard to sustain, and even an expert like him found it quite taxing.

A soft chuckle rang out from beneath the mysterious figure's hood, as though he didn't care at all about the death of his subordinates. He gently waved his hands in a commanding gesture, causing a number of archers to point their bows towards Grizzly. A wave of steel-tipped arrows shot out with incredible force, but right at this moment a black blur suddenly flashed past, using his blade to strike down all of the arrows with incomprehensible speed. This was the other captain of the elite squad, Wulf!

The two elite captains stood back-to-back. Grizzly lifted his blood-stained boxing

gloves up high, while Wulf lifted up his snow-bright saber.

“Careful.”

“You too!”

There was no need for men like them to waste words. The two had battled side by side for countless years and had long ago reached a tacit understanding. Neither felt any hesitation at all in letting each other provide cover from behind. As dozens of sweeper thugs and a number of maneaters surrounded them, the other elite guards quickly came to reinforce them as well, causing both sides to be bogged into a miserable fight.

Grizzly was battling furiously for his life. He let out a furious roar, “Tartarus, are you guys gonna just sit and watch? Are you seriously gonna wait until all of us are dead?”

The sinister-faced fat man’s beady little eyes rolled with crafty amusement. To be honest, he was indeed considering just this. If the elite squad was wiped out, Tartarus’ status in the outpost would instantly skyrocket. This was a good thing, not a bad thing! Both the sweepers and the elite guards were formidable foes. This battle wouldn’t come to an end that quickly!

“Hey. Hey! HEY! Why the hell aren’t you helping? This is crazy!” Cloudhawk was filled with utter contempt towards the fat man. “The outpost is at the verge of being wiped out, and the only thing in your mind is how to profit from it?”

Slyfox gave Cloudhawk a hard look. “Stop fuckin’ jabberin’ and just stand clear!”

“If you guys won’t go, I will!” A resolute look was on Cloudhawk’s face. “We’ll all die anyways. I’d rather die fighting!”

“You talk too much, you punk-ass kid!” But when Slyfox remembered how Tartarus did seem to owe Grizzly a favor, he turned to cast a glance at the still-unmoving leader of the sweeper battalion. He felt a tinge of regret in his heart. The real reason why he hadn’t been willing to get involved was primarily because he still didn’t know enough about this foe.

Although Slyfox didn’t have Cloudhawk’s animal-like instincts, he did have analytical skills. In truth, judging from the actual numbers of sweepers involved, this wasn’t necessarily a battle which Blackflag Outpost could not win. The greatest unknown variable was that cloaked figure in the back.

Slyfox wanted to wait for the cloaked figure to act first so that he would be able to analyze the man's abilities, but the dirty, mysterious man still didn't seem the slightest bit inclined to join the fight. It was true that Slyfox couldn't just keep standing by on the sidelines, and so he gestured with his hand. "Let's join the fight!"

Were they finally going to enter the fray? Cloudhawk immediately hoisted his shotgun, preparing to join the fight.

"Stay back for now, rookies." Mad Dog's entire body was rippling with built-up energy, and the ugly scars on his face were beginning to twist and turn. The veins on his muscles began to writhe like worms as he flexed his muscles, and he looked as tense as a fully drawn bowstring. "I'll go first!"

His feet left a small crater in the earth as he shot out like a cannon ball. A howling wind blew past the other mercenaries as Mad Dog all but disappeared from in front of them.

Mad Dog was incredibly fast! He wasn't an agility metahuman, but when he unleashed all of his formidable physical might and focused it on speed, he was every bit as fast as any agility metahuman.

Two of the sweeper thugs sought to impede the rapidly-approaching Mad Dog, but he didn't even slow down. In fact, he bellowed as he actually accelerated towards them! His furious posture and his snarling face were such that anyone who saw him would feel certain that even if a mountain was standing in his path, he would still be able to ram it aside. The sweeper thugs had never encountered such a crazy human, but they were only startled for a brief instant before they lifted their war-axes high, then sent them chopping down towards Mad Dog.

CRACK! CRACK!

Slyfox didn't even aim his pistols at all; he seemed to have simply swung his arms forward carelessly. Two plumes of smoke burst out of the barrel of his pistols, and those two sweeper thugs immediately fell backwards.

While running past those two sweepers, Mad Dog grabbed the war-axes from their now-unsteady hands as he leapt into the air. His feet landed on their heads, crushing their necks as he used them to propel himself over six meters into the air. Those two great war-axes flashed with a dazzling cold light in his hands as he soared straight towards a maneater and chopped down at him.

This was an extremely risky aerial vault, because not even the most powerful of men could dodge well in midair. The sweepers here were all veterans of many battles; there was naturally no way they would ignore such a perfect opportunity! Two of the sweepers hurriedly drew their bows, preparing to shoot the midair Mad Dog with their steel-tipped bows.

But right at this moment, two more pistol cracks could be heard!

Two bullets passed through the grouped sweepers and humans with inhuman accuracy, then instantly exploded into the heads of those two archers. They didn't even have a chance to react or fully draw their bows before they fell to the ground, dead.

From start to finish, Mad Dog had ignored everyone and everything save his target. He roared more furiously than any wild animal, and his roar was far more terrifying. CLANK! His two thick war-axes descended as he himself did, slamming straight into the maneater's head. The war-axes, the maneater helmet, the maneater's head… all three instantly exploded into tiny pieces!

The incredibly massive form of the maneater was actually knocked into the air by the force of this flow. It 'somersaulted' through the air, spraying blood and brain matter everywhere before it finally slammed into the ground with the force of a mountain.

Mad Dog had a rictus of a crazed grin on his face. The dual-strike he had used to slay the maneater had been so heavy that the skin between his thumb and his forefinger had split apart, but he felt no sense of pain at all. He pulled his snow-white machetes from their sheaths by his waist, then cut through the shields, war-axes, armors, and helmets of multiple nearby thugs as though he was chopping through rotten wood, reducing their flesh and their bones to piles of sliced meat.

Such incredible power! Both the two captains of the elite guards as well as these two captains of the Tartarus mercenaries were simply stunning. So long as such powerful humans were on their side, the outpost might just stand a chance at survival!

But Cloudhawk could sense a bone-chilling aura sweep across the region. Although he wasn't the target of this murderous intent, it was so chilling and so violent that he felt as though he had previously been standing beneath the blazing sun but had now been thrust into an icy pit. He felt as though every single cell in his body had been frozen… and this murderous intent was coming from the cloaked figure, the one who had yet to make any moves at all.

Cloudhawk called out in warning, “Careful, Slyfox! That guy is about to attack!”

Slyfox was slightly startled, “Oh, is he now?”

The mysterious figure produced a pair of long, straight knives from his sleeves, then whispered a few words that sounded like the hissing of a viper. His dark eyes were as black as the endless depths of the sea, but waves of a murderous intent could be seen within them.

He didn’t ‘run’ forward, he ‘shot’ out like a bullet from a gun, an arrow from a bow, a javelin from its thrower. The way he moved seemed to violate the laws of physics! A moment ago, he had been completely still. Now, he was somehow in full motion! There had been no process of acceleration, but he was now moving at a terrifying, incomprehensible speed. His graceful movements seemed to suggest that he was able to ignore the effects of gravity itself, and the ragged cape fluttering in the wind behind him seemed almost like a demon stretching out its black, infernal wings.

He was attacking! Finally, he was attacking!

Chapter 25
The Experts of the Wastelands

As soon as the mysterious man began to move, Slyfox moved as well. Even if Cloudhawk hadn't issued a warning, Slyfox wouldn't have relaxed his vigil. He knew exactly who the most dangerous person on this battlefield was and exactly who he needed to keep an eye on. His twin customized pistols spun in beautiful intersecting arcs in front of him as spurts of flame erupted from the barrels. He had shot four times in an instant!

Slyfox was a truly accomplished control metahuman, and his gunnery skills were top-notch in Blackflag Outpost. He could instantly lock onto and shoot even a falcon flying at top speed, and was able to shoot a sparrow from thirty meters away as easily as shooting an elephant. Even though the mysterious man was faster than anyone Slyfox had ever met, could he move faster than a bullet?

Slyfox was highly experienced and a true master marksman. These four shots completely sealed off the space around the mysterious man, ensuring that no matter where he dodged he would still be struck by at least two bullets. There was no way he would be able to escape unscathed! In addition, Slyfox had just used some of his own custom-made, hand-crafted specialty bullets. These bullets were so powerful that so long as they landed on any part of their target, their target would definitely be crippled and slain.

The mysterious man's eyes were pitch-black, like a mirroring pool of darkness. These eyes saw and recorded all of Slyfox's movements, up to the point when he pulled the trigger.

Impressive! This gunner hidden within the outpost was definitely the most formidable marksman the mysterious man had ever met, and both his timing as well as his aim were impeccable. The mysterious man had virtually no avenues of escape at all.

However, the emphasis was on the word 'virtually'. This wasn't an absolute statement!

The mysterious man's powerful ocular abilities allowed him to notice all four of Slyfox's shots, and he instantaneously was able to predict the trajectory of the bullets.

He could tell that it was impossible to dodge all of them; at most, he would be able to dodge two.

But two was enough! The mysterious man dodged to one side, avoiding two of the shots. At the same time, his two arms streaked through the air like meteors through the night sky, bringing the blades of his knives in front of the other two bullets.

Sparks flew everywhere as an ear-piercing screech could be heard. The knives had actually split the two bullets into four pieces. The cut was so perfect that if you used a scale or a ruler to measure the four halves, you would find that in size and shape the four bullet-halves were absolutely identical.

For the first time, a look of astonishment appeared on Slyfox's face. "No way. That's impossible." How could you use a knife to cut bullets in midair? It required perfect accuracy and control, instantaneous reflexes, and better vision than an eagle's. This was simply unbelievable! Only someone who had multiple high-level metapowers over agility, control, and more would be able to accomplish such a task. Less than one in a million wastelanders would have the required powers, and they would be considered truly supreme combatants. As for Blackflag Outpost, it held no such figures!

Who the hell was this guy?!

Cloudhawk clenched his shotgun in his hands. Several times now, he had planned to fire the weapon, but in the end he gave up the notion. He knew his own limitations and knew that he was far from being a match for Slyfox. If not even Slyfox could kill this man, how could he possibly succeed? In addition, shotgun pellets were sprayed over a very wide area. If he was to fire from such a great distance, he might even hit some of his allies.

Calm. He had to stay calm! This was what Cloudhawk told himself repeatedly. He couldn't waste any opportunities. If he wasn't certain of success, he shouldn't attack at all. Otherwise, he would draw that terrifying man's attention and his life would be snuffed out like a candle.

The mysterious man's dark gaze, as fathomless as the depths of the sea, was now locked onto Slyfox. The other experts didn't pose a threat to him, but this exceptional marksman did. The mysterious man knew who his real enemy in this fight would be. He had to first get rid of this troublesome marksman!

The mysterious man didn't halt at all, continuing his headlong charge. Three members of the elite guards were in his path, and so he ended up disposing of them along the way. The three guards didn't even have a chance to see how he attacked; they just saw the light of his knives pierce through their bodies. As they collapsed into pools of their own blood, the last thing they saw was his cloaked figure disappearing past them, not hesitating in the slightest.

"Damn him!" The second captain of the elite guards, Wulf, was enraged! Wulf was an agility metahuman, which meant that in speed at least he wasn't significantly inferior to the mysterious man. If the members of the outpost had to choose one person who was close to being able to keep up with the mysterious man, they would definitely choose Wulf!

Wulf tossed away his saber and pulled out a pair of short knives. Short weapons were more agile and carried more punching power, and they also held advantages in fast-paced battles. In the blink of an eye, the two exchanged four or five blows! Knife-light flickered repeatedly as these two incredibly fast experts clashed against each other in close combat.

Almost as soon as Wulf engaged the man in combat, Wulf realized that he had made a mistake! First of all, the man's metapowers were clearly higher-level than Wulf's own; although the man was using a pair of long knives, he was able to wield them with just as much speed and agility as Wulf wielded his short knives. Even worse, the mysterious man's attacks were so accurate, it was as though he had measured them to a millimeter in advance. With each strike, the mysterious man was able to attack Wulf at a weak spot, using a small amount of force to blunt Wulf's strength, then unleash counter-attacks of incredible power.

Although Wulf was a very experienced combatant, he still had the occasional flaw in his attacks. The mysterious man attacked as though his moves had all been calculated countless times in advance by a computer; not only did he display no weaknesses, his attacks were precise to the extreme. After just a few exchanged blows, Wulf was cast into a position of great weakness.

Wulf wanted to retreat, but it was far too late. A long knife came howling through the air towards him!

The mysterious man's knife sheared through half of Wulf's head. The blood didn't even have a chance to spurt out before the man turned and once more continued his charge

towards Slyfox. This entire time, he had shown no hesitation and made no wasted movements at all. It was as though he hadn't been fighting one of the outpost's supreme fighters; rather, he had merely been disposing of a nameless pawn. The difference in skill between the two was extremely apparent!

Grizzly let out an enraged howl. "WULF!"

Slyfox didn't let this affect his mental state. He suddenly reached out and grabbed an outpost warrior, then spun the warrior to stand in front of him.

"W-what are you…" The outpost warrior had yet to catch his bearings when a pair of ice-cold gun barrels pressed against his back. A crafty look flashed through the mysterious man's pitch-black eyes, and he immediately moved to dodge.

CRACK! CRACK! A pair of gunshots rang out as a pair of bullets blasted through the body of that unfortunate outpost warrior, missing the mysterious man by just a hair.

Slyfox let out a frustrated curse. The man was able to lock onto his movements, then dodge in the same instant that Slyfox pulled the triggers on his pistols. As a result, Slyfox had decided to block the man's line of vision and shoot at him through a human shield. Who would've thought that the man would still be able to dodge it with incredible accuracy and an almost preternatural sixth sense!

The mysterious man had perfect control over his own body, and he made no wasted movements at all, nor did he make any errors in judgement. He also had that absolutely stifling level of speed, and a keen sense of danger that was almost animalistic in its accuracy. He truly was an expert the likes of which were rarely seen in the wastelands.

The two were now extremely close to each other. Slyfox could almost see the specter of death reaching out for him! The mysterious figure was clearly determined to kill Slyfox no matter what the cost. Mad Dog was in the front lines, tied down by a host of thugs. The other mercenaries weren't even close to being a match for the mysterious man; in fact, they weren't even strong enough to slow him down. What to do?

A cold light suddenly flickered through Slyfox's narrowed eyes. His normal, beaming countenance had completely disappeared. It was as though he had transformed into a completely different person, a person who was incredibly cold and calm. This was a mindset that had been formed through countless life-and-death battles. The more

dangerous the situation was, the calmer he had to be.

His fat body suddenly began to move with an agility and grace which belied his size. His two customized pistols began to bark and spit out flames repeatedly as multiple bullets began to howl past the outpost warriors and towards the mysterious man. One bullet actually went straight through an outpost warrior's neck, then continued onwards while spraying forth a bloody mist.

So what if he accidentally killed a few people on his own side? Hell, so what if he killed a few of them on purpose? Slyfox was not the kind, benevolent type to begin with. He knew exactly how difficult it would be to hit this man, and so he was willing to pay any price and do anything necessary to increase the odds. By comparison, sacrificing a few of the outpost guards was absolutely nothing. He didn't have much time left; every single shot, every single opportunity, was incomparably priceless.

But it was all useless!

The mysterious man's night-black eyes remained as calm as a tranquil pool of ink, and his gaze didn't change in the slightest. His movements fluctuated as randomly and unpredictably as a viper's, avoiding the large majority of Slyfox's bullets while using his knives to block the bullets he couldn't dodge. He advanced incredibly quickly, and everyone who got in his way (by accident or by design) would be met with his flashing knife. All those who barred his path were sliced apart with ease.

He was about to reach Slyfox! Slyfox only had a single bullet left in each of his pistols, and the enemy was so close and so fast that Slyfox only had enough time for one shot anyhow. If he missed this next shot… well, one could imagine what would happen to a gunner when attacked in close combat by a knife-fighter like the mysterious man.

Slyfox stared unblinkingly at his opponent. All others in the surrounding area seemed to completely vanish as Slyfox concentrated every iota of his energy and attention on his foe. Slyfox watched his movements, his breathing, his every minor motion. After having taken all factors and possible responses into consideration…

Crack! A tongue of flame flicked out from the barrel of his right pistol.

A sharp light flashed through the mysterious man's eyes. Not only had this gunner perfectly calculated his movements and all potential variables, the gunner had even taken into account his reaction speed and the speed at which his hands were able to

move. This shot had virtually sealed his fate. What a truly formidable gunner!

The mysterious man suddenly struck out his knife, moving 30% faster than he had in the past. Clang! A few sparks appeared in midair as the bullet was once more chopped apart.

Slyfox's face turned completely ashen. "Damn."

The mysterious man didn't pause for even a second. He was like a hungry wolf who had spotted his prey, and he sent one of his death-bringing knives straight towards his enemy's throat at incredible speeds.

The knife moved closer and closer to Slyfox, a harbinger of doom which quickly grew in size and took up more and more of his field of vision. At last, a look of fear was in Slyfox's eyes, and his face was as pale as a corpse. Slyfox looked just like a man should when faced with his own imminent and inescapable doom.

Without question, this knife was going to take his life!

This was what the mysterious man believed, and he put all of his effort into this strike. As soon as that sharp knife landed, the chubby neck would be split open and the fat head would go flying like a dandelion in the wind.

Swish! The knife flashed with cold light as it swept past Slyfox's neck, spots of smeared blood on its blade!

Chapter 26
Life and Death in the Balance

The knife merely nicked Slyfox in the neck; it didn't actually sever his head from the rest of his body. This was because, right at the critical moment, the mysterious man's acute hearing picked up an incredibly soft, whistling sound. He was completely unprepared for the two cold knives that whistled through the air as they shot straight towards him.

This was a pair of long, slender, and sharp scalpels. One of the scalpels shot towards the man's chest, while the other one was aimed directly at his forehead. There were absolutely no flaws in the speed, timing, or execution of this attack. The most terrifying thing of all was that it seemed as though the two scalpels had appeared out of nowhere! Even someone as incredibly perceptive as the mysterious man was completely unable to tell who it was who had launched this attack at him.

If the mysterious man had stubbornly persisted with his attempt to decapitate the gunner, there would have been no way for him to escape these two strikes. It might've been possible for him to make slight adjustments to ensure that the scalpels didn't hit him in any critical areas, but when he saw the glistening, slick blue light covering the blade he immediately abandoned this notion.

This was an absolutely deadly attack… and from start to finish, the man still had no clue as to who had launched this attack. The mysterious man had held thirty percent of his power in reserve in this battle, which was the right choice to make. That way, if something unexpected happened, he would have enough power left to keep himself safe. However, the lethal strike he had aimed at the gunner was with all the speed and power he could muster.

In other words, the mysterious man himself was in an extremely vulnerable situation for a short instant. Although the moment was brief… an old, experienced, and deadly assassin would always be ready for the perfect moment to strike. And how could such a deadly assassin possibly forego using poison for such a critical strike?

Both scalpels had been smeared with powerful nerve-numbing agents. Even if they didn't strike any fatal points, the slightest nick from them would be enough to ensure

that he would instantly lose the majority of his combat strength. This was far too dangerous. He simply couldn't afford to take the risk!

And so the mysterious man suddenly halted his advance, his long knives nicking Slyfox on the neck as they swung back to block the scalpels. The mysterious man's sea-dark eyes once more began to turn… but he still had no idea where the assassin was hiding.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Another pair of sharp scalpels came flying towards him. This time, however, even Cloudhawk saw a figure moving at high speed in launching the attack, to say nothing of the mysterious man. When Cloudhawk saw who it was, his eyes almost bulged out of their sockets.

No wonder he hadn't seen Mantis this entire time!

Cloudhawk had thought that Mantis was not taking part in the fight. So as it turned out, Mantis had been concealing himself amongst the other mercenaries! When he had been concealing himself, not even Cloudhawk had the slightest inkling that he was present; in fact, Cloudhawk hadn't even noticed that they numbered one more person than usual. And… the entire reason why Mantis had hidden himself in the area around Slyfox in a shadow-like manner was precisely so that he could deal with a situation like this!

As Mantis threw out two more flying scalpels at high speed and the mysterious man began to pull back, Mantis suddenly somersaulted to the other side with incredible speed. A dark blue dagger gleamed with cold light as it pierced towards the mysterious man! It was a fast, steady, and merciless attack!

The speed which Mantis had just displayed was every bit as fast as the already-deceased Wulf had possessed. He was in full control of the tempo of this fight, and this strike was pitch-perfect as well. Not even a heartbeat had passed since the mysterious man had knocked the second pair of scalpels aside, but now a deadly, envenomed blue dagger was right before his very eyes.

This new assailant was incredibly dangerous! The mysterious man had been battling for quite some time, but for the first time he felt as though he was being stalked by a viper. If this dagger nicked him even slightly, it would unquestionably deliver a mortal, death-dealing blow to the mysterious man. The mysterious man sent the edge of his long knife scraping against the dagger, causing a line of sparks to erupt in midair, then spun the other way as he delivered a whirling slash towards Mantis. However, Mantis

didn't hesitate at all as he leapt backwards with incredible speed and agility, borrowing from the momentum of the clash.

An assassin's paramount rule was to succeed in killing the target with one attack. If you failed, your goal would be to immediately retreat safely. This was a fundamental rule of being an assassin!

The mysterious man's attack missed, but before he had a chance to recover, a cold, sinister, murderous look flashed through Slyfox's eyes. In truth, this entire thing had been a plot! The gunner had intentionally let the mysterious man draw close, allowing the assassin to launch a series of deadly strikes. Now that the mysterious man's offensive rhythm had been completely disrupted, flaws in his movements had been revealed.

It actually wasn't the assassin's responsibility to actually kill this man. Slyfox had been waiting for the perfect moment this entire time… and now, he still had one bullet left. Given the situation and given how close they were, how could he possibly miss?

The process might sound complicated, but it happened incredibly fast. Mantis had thrown out four scalpels, catching the mysterious man completely off-guard and disrupting his rhythm, then launched a deadly strike that forced the man to reveal a fatal flaw in his defenses. This entire process had taken less than two seconds! This was more than enough time for Slyfox to fire the perfect shot.

Crack!

The final bullet burst forth with a tendril of flame from the barrel of the revolver. The mysterious man had to admit that these people were tough. Very tough. They could definitely be described as some of the top experts of the wastelands. However… it wasn't enough. The man's body suddenly seemed to expand in size, almost as though all of his muscles instantly became many times larger than before. He instantly unleashed 120% of his full power!

As soon as Slyfox had fired his gun, the mysterious man leapt into the air, used one long knife to block the bullet, then once more stabbed out with the other one towards Slyfox, sending that cold blade directly towards his heart!

Everyone was stunned by this. Not only was he able to block the attack, he was even able to counter-attack in midair?

Slyfox was out of bullets. Mantis wasn't in a position to stop the attack.

A hint of a mocking smile appeared on the mysterious man's face as his cold knife inched closer and closer towards Slyfox's chest. He was about to finally kill this dangerous gunner, once and for all… but right at this moment, something happened which caught him completely off-guard. A skinny, unprepossessing little figure suddenly popped up from behind Slyfox's back. The kid was clutching a shotgun in his hands, and the black barrel was pointed straight at the mysterious man.

Slyfox let out a fierce shout. "SHOOT HIM!"

When the mysterious man's attention had been focused on the two experts before him, the ordinary-looking Cloudhawk had seized the opportunity to hide himself directly behind Slyfox. Cloudhawk knew that if he wanted a chance to shoot and kill this man, the position he had just chosen was the perfect position to be in. And now… his opportunity had come!

The mysterious man's body was in the middle of the air. No warrior, no matter how powerful, would be able to find any leverage to dodge while in midair. In addition, the two were extremely close to each other! The mysterious man's knife was about to kiss Slyfox's clothes, which meant that he had all but sent himself directly into the waiting barrel of the shotgun.

Cloudhawk pulled the trigger.

CRACK!

Countless steel pellets blasted forth. A dispersed shotgun blast was difficult to dodge in any situation, much less in midair. The mysterious man's black cloak was completely torn to shreds as he himself was knocked three or four meters backwards from the force of the blow. He tumbled to the ground, rolling a few times before he came to a halt face-down as streams of blood began to flow from his body.

They had finished him! Everyone revealed looks of excitement and exhilaration!

"Not bad, kid!"

"Well done!"

"Beautiful!"

The mercenaries all called out in celebration, and even Woola let out a few congratulatory howls. As for the sweepers, strange looks appeared on their faces. They had never imagined that anyone would be able to defeat their boss!

In truth, less than a minute had passed since the cloaked figure had first started his charge towards Slyfox. This had all happened so quickly that there was no way ordinary people could even respond. As for the mercenaries, there was obviously no way that they could've planned this out in advance. This had all happened purely out of a silent, instinctive rapport.

If Mantis had been just a heartbeat slower, Slyfox would've been hacked to death. If Slyfox hadn't left one final bullet for the very end or had hesitated for just a half-second after Mantis launched his attack, then his shot wouldn't have been able to force the man to jump into the air to dodge. And if Cloudhawk had been just slightly slower in firing his shotgun, all of that previous effort would have gone to waste.

Thankfully, all of them had worked together with smooth, perfect coordination. In the end, they had finally dealt with that dangerous enemy.

Cloudhawk was panting furiously, his frayed nerves finally calming down. He could hardly believe what had just happened. Had the shot which killed the sweeper leader really come from his hands?

This feeling of life and death being separated by a thread… this feeling was fucking awesome!

But Slyfox and Mantis were completely composed. "Mad Dog once praised your combat instincts as being excellent!" For once, Slyfox said a few words of praise towards Cloudhawk. "Seems like he was tellin' the truth. I'm just happy you didn't waste all of the hard work I put into training you."

Hard work training me? You sonufabitch!

Cloudhawk was this close to cursing at the man. Still… now that the leader had been slain, the rest of the sweepers were nothing to worry about. The mercenaries and the elite guards were still ready to fight, and they held an overwhelming advantage in numbers. How could they possibly lose to freaks like this?

"Not bad at all."

Just as everyone was celebrating, a casual, cold voice suddenly rang out from the ground. Countless astonished gazes were instantly attracted to the mysterious man's 'corpse'…which was slowly, unhurriedly rising to its feet. "But in the end, you didn't quite get the job done."

The six remaining maneaters and dozens of thugs had already charged forwards, coming to a halt directly in front of their leader. As for the outpost forces, they withdrew as well. Both sides once more stared at each other from a short distance.

This was absolutely bizarre. Cloudhawk had definitely hit the man head-on! The man hadn't been wearing steel armor or other defensive equipment; otherwise, there was no way he could've moved with such speed and agility. How, then? How had he survived? Did he have an immortal body?

The mysterious man rose to his feet, his tattered cloak just barely hanging from his body. His face had previously been as pale as paper, but now a great deal of serpentine scales had appeared on its surface. Given that his strange eyes were completely pitch-black, he truly looked like an ominous creature.

The mysterious man tossed aside his tattered cloak, fully revealing his entire upper body. Although he wasn't as muscular as Mad Dog, his muscles were extremely toned and even, and they seemed to possess explosive, panther-like power. His skin, however, was almost abnormally pale… and his pale skin was completely covered with those slender scales that looked like the scales of a snake.

The shotgun pellets had blasted a large wound into his chest, and dozens of those steel pellets had clearly bored deep into his body. And yet… although the wound was frightening to behold, it was actually nothing more than a superficial flesh wound. The muscles around the pellets flexed slightly, and one bloodstained pellet after another began to pop out and fall to the ground.

Cloudhawk finally realized that this mutant's scales served as a form of protection for him. He also had an extremely high-level control metapower, and so had nearly perfect control over his power. As a result, as soon as the pellets blasted through his scales, he had immediately tightened the muscles locally around each pellet, ensuring that none of them were able to strike into his heart or his other important organs.

Cloudhawk had hit him with a perfect shot, but it was meaningless. A wound like this was no wound at all.

The outpost defenders had rather unpleasant looks on their faces. How many strange powers did this mysterious fellow have?

The mysterious man's gaze remained as calm and settled as ever. "It would be a waste to kill you. I suggest you abandon Blackflag Outpost and work for me instead. The entire wasteland belongs to us… and together, we can accomplish something grand!"

By now, everyone could tell that he still had yet to use his full power, even now! There were still more than 150 sweepers; their main combat power had been preserved. The outpost, however, had suffered horrendous casualties and didn't have much combat power left. The situation right now looked extremely grim.

Fire another shot? Cloudhawk knew his own limits. They had managed to catch the man off-guard once; there was no way the man would let it happen again! But right at this moment, a voice which Cloudhawk had never heard before suddenly rang out from afar.

"You want to poach guards from Blackflag Outpost? What makes you think I would agree to that?"

Chapter 27
The Bloodsoaked Queen

The elite guards looked as though a heavy burden had been lifted off their shoulders, while Slyfox and Mad Dog revealed looks of extremely wariness. Had she finally come out? If so… then it was time for this battle to come to an end.

The mysterious man's gaze flickered slightly. He didn't seem surprised, only cautious. He let out a chuckle, then said, "You really are quite composed, to be able to wait so long before coming out."

Cloudhawk had no idea why everyone had such strange looks on their faces. Just as he was puzzling over this question… a figure suddenly, slowly emerged from the heart of the outpost.

This figure wore a savage, demonic mask. Perfectly straight black hair cascaded across her back like a waterfall, and her voice sounded sinister and hoarse, almost as though it was several different voices merged together, making it difficult for others to discern her gender from her voice alone. However, judging from her silhouette she was definitely a woman, and one with a stupendous figure at that.

Even though she was dressed in a long, loose cloak, everyone could still vaguely make out the form-fitting leather clothes she wore beneath the cloak. No one knew what type of leather it was, but it surely was no ordinary leather. The leather clothes covered virtually every part of her entire body, including her firm and rounded rear, her long slim legs, and her pert and ample bosom. It could be said that her form-fitting leather clothes put her perfect physique and feminine curves on full display.

This woman was not carrying any weapons, wielding neither sword, knife, axe, nor staff. Nor did she wield long-ranged weaponry such as guns or bows. However… she wore a pair of extremely exquisite gloves on her hands that looked like they were formed from dark-gold silk. The gloves were studded with something that looked like gemstones. In addition, she also wore on her neck a snow-white cross that looked like a decorative necklace.

Although no one could see what she looked like or how old she was, an aura of iciness,

arrogance, and skill radiated out from her in waves. When she entered the ranks of the defenders, not a single person dared to stand close to her, not even Slyfox and the other elites.

Cloudhawk couldn't help but ask, "Who is this?"

"Shut it, kid! Don't ask questions right now." Slyfox gave him a hard glare. "Just be a good boy, sit back, and watch the show!"

The sweeper leader began to chuckle. "The commander of Blackflag Outpost, the Bloodsoaked Queen… your reputation precedes you."

The Bloodsoaked Queen? The commander of the outpost? Cloudhawk finally remembered that the outpost had a leader! He had been told about her the first day he had arrived, but this leader was so mysterious and low-key that in the past month and a half Cloudhawk hadn't even heard any stories about her, to say nothing of meeting her.

This made no sense though. What took her so long? Why did she wait for the outpost to be beaten into such a bad condition before she made her appearance?

The mysterious, powerful leader of the sweeper battalion licked his lips, his tongue long and slender. He couldn't hide the look of frenzied lust in his eyes, and he was unable to maintain his earlier demeanor of calm. He was like a hunter who, after experiencing countless tribulations, had finally found his prey… or perhaps he was a treasure seeker who had finally found a great treasury after sailing through oceans and climbing through mountains. Excitement, exhilaration, nervousness, and other emotions filled his breast, causing his body to start to tremble. "Once I kill you, I'll take control over this outpost."

The Bloodsoaked Queen's face was covered with that terrifying mask, preventing anyone from seeing the emotions on her face. Her two eyes, however, gleamed behind the mask with a look that was as sharp as a sword and even more piercing to the gaze than the rays of the rising sun.

"No need to put on pretenses in front of me." The Bloodsoaked Queen's hoarse voice sounded like the shattering of glass, but a hint of rage could be heard within that sinister coldness. The rage didn't seem like a blazing inferno; rather, it was like smoldering coals that had long ago merged into her soul and become a part of her. "I

know who you are, and I know why you have come here. I also know who it is that stands behind you. So… let's cut the crap. I'll give you a chance. Come at me."

The mysterious man's face stiffened momentarily, but then that look of wild excitement once more appeared in his eyes. "Good. Good! Then I'll see for myself how powerful people who have come from that place are!"

The mysterious man, however, was not in a rush to attack. Instead, he gestured with his hand. The largest, most muscular maneater acknowledged his order, then burst forth like a beast that had just been released from its shackles! The maneater ran forward, his heavy footsteps pounding into the earth. The maneater's great warhammer was covered with the crimson gore of the countless outpost guards he had slain, and he delivered a huge smashing blow straight at the Queen.

THRUM!

The earth itself shook, and a storm of dust arose! From afar, Cloudhawk could see the warhammer miss and strike into the earth instead. Somehow, that brutal and savage attack had completely missed its target. Why? How? Had the maneater gone blind? Obviously not!

The Queen leisurely strode forward, moving past the heavy warhammer. Her movements seemed slow, but in reality she was incredibly fast. The maneater didn't even have a chance to raise the warhammer a second time before she was standing right in front of him. She gently placed her right hand against the heavy cuirass covering the maneater's thick chest, and she gave him a loving stroke as though she was petting a cat.

A vibration suddenly manifested! Cloudhawk was completely shocked by what he was seeing. He clearly could sense a strange thrumming sensation, almost like a guitar string being plucked, appear before him once more. He instantly turned to stare at the source of the sensation… only to find that it was actually coming from the Queen's black gloves!

Cloudhawk could sense the vibrations growing stronger and stronger. Some sort of energy was building up rapidly! Before he even had a chance to figure out what was going on, the maneater suddenly let out a miserable scream!

His eyes, his nose, his mouth, his ears… even the crevices of his helmet were suddenly

emitting fiery plumes of heat. A heartbeat later, the maneater's massive body was suddenly swallowed up by an absolutely beautiful flame which appeared out of nowhere. The terrifyingly high temperatures caused even his armor to glow red! The maneater's body was charred into black crisp in just a few short moments, causing a nauseating stench of burnt meat to waft outwards from it.

Thud! The flame disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared. By the time the maneater collapsed, its entire body had been charred. Its armor was still glowing red and had begun to melt into the ground, causing a series of hissing, crackling sounds to be heard.

What was this? Some sort of supernatural power?

Everyone watched with tongue-tied expressions on their faces. It was as though they had seen a tiger attack a mouse, only for the mouse to suddenly turn and swallow the tiger whole.

Despite the high temperature in the area around her, the Bloodsoaked Queen was in immaculate condition; not even a single hair on her head had been signed. From start to finish, she hadn't so much as even glanced at the maneater. Her eyes behind her mask were even colder than ice as she swept her gaze across the other sweepers, seeming to stab at them with her eyes. Looks of terror appeared on the faces of the sweepers, and they all took several steps back.

The mysterious man visibly trembled as a look of slight fear appeared on his face. The eager look in his eyes, however, had not diminished in the slightest. He tossed away one of the long knives he had been holding, only to assume a two-handed grip with the other. "So you really did come from that place. Is this the power you brought from there to the wastelands"

The Bloodsoaked Queen's voice was as hoarse and cold as ever. "You aren't worthy of knowing the answer to that question. My patience has its limits. Make your move."

The mysterious man knew that the difference in power between the two of them was enormous. He would only have one chance. Just one! And he only had it because the Bloodsoaked Queen had chosen to give it to him, most likely because she held him in complete contempt. Even though he clearly knew how terrifying she was, he still wanted to give her a try… because he wanted to test out that inconceivable power in person!

He suddenly moved, his accumulated power sending him forward like an arrow out of a bow. He was moving much faster than he had previously, and even his long knife seemed to quiver with anticipation, as though it could sense its master's determination and killing intent. He wasn't tall, nor was he very muscular, but when he charged forwards he was like an enormous behemoth that carried an irresistible, inexhaustible amount of power. This aura alone would be enough to terrify any of the powerful experts present, making it hard for them to even think about trying to take this strike head-on.

Ten more meters!

The mysterious man's face became increasingly berserk. It was as though the entire world had vanished, with only the masked woman remaining. He seemed to have focused all of his thoughts, all of his energy onto this unmoving, statue-like woman. His every single blood cell was bellowing with rage, as though countless beasts were rampaging through his veins, screaming out for release!

Five meters. Four meters. Three meters. Two meters!

When his speed reached its utmost limit, he suddenly flexed his legs. Every single cell in his body was quivering, and every single muscle was contracting. He gathered all of the strength and power he had in his body, including his legs, his calves, his thighs, his chest, his arms, and his wrist… then focused it all on the tip of his knife as he sent it chopping downwards.

This was no longer a human being delivering a blow. This was a flying knife that had a human attached to it! The man was an extremely high-class control metahuman. In order to make his knife faster, sharper, and more powerful, he had caused every single cell in his body to surpass their normal limitations, forcing every single muscle to release every single scrap of power they had while holding nothing back.

This was no ordinary strike. Absolutely everything had been poured into it; his strength, his momentum, his mental focus, his willpower… it had all been infused into this chop! The man had no other thoughts in his mind. He was like a dancer who had been enraptured by his own dance, losing himself within it as he drew out his mind and his very soul, then merged them into this strike.

Nobody could stop his knife. Even steel would be sheared through like mud! The man could almost smell the intoxicating scent of the woman's blood spurting out from her

body and splashing over him, bathing him with its warmth like the rays of the sun.

The Queen finally made her move… and the man's flashing, dazzling knife suddenly stopped in midair.

The knife would've been able to shear through steel like butter, but it was actually blocked by a single, graceful hand. Or, to be precise, the five long fingers on that hand had latched onto the knife. The parts of the knife that were in contact with those gloves instantly began to glow red with heat, and even a few wafts of white smoke could be seen arising from it.

Chapter 28
Breathtaking Power

The Bloodsoaked Queen had a cavalier attitude about her, as though she had done nothing more than catch a butterfly that was flying within her flower garden. It seemed like such a casual action, but it instantly froze the long knife despite the shocking amount of power that had been poured into it.

All momentum had been lost. All of the murderous intent within it had been dispelled. The mental energy, willpower, strength, and soul that had been poured into that knife were of no avail; it seemed like it was trapped in a steel vise, with no way to withdraw it at all. The snow-bright blade quickly began to turn red from heat, like a piece of iron in a furnace.

The Bloodsoaked Queen's grip tightened, and the red-hot knife began to break apart. A spiderweb of cracks had appeared on its surface, as though the knife was a fragile piece of glass that was on the verge of shattering.

"You-" The mysterious man's deep, hooded gaze was now filled with shock and awe. He was only able to get this single word out, because in the next instant a seal suddenly lit up on the Queen's gloves as she unleashed an even greater amount of force through her palms.

The knife exploded! A terrifying, beautiful ball of fire erupted between the two as the energy-filled knife blew up like a bomb that had been ignited. Countless metal shards sprayed in every direction. The mysterious man was blasted away by the force of the explosion, with his face, chest, and arms all punctured by the flying metal shards while the blazing flames caused his entire body to be covered with horrendous burns. By the time he crashed down on the ground, he looked like a hole-riddled rag doll that had been in a fire.

Cloudhawk furiously rubbed at his eyes. What the hell had just happened? All he had seen was the mysterious man charge towards the Queen. Moments later, there had been a sudden explosion! This had all happened far too quickly, and so he hadn't been able to make out all the details… but when the Bloodsoaked Queen had made her move, Cloudhawk had sensed a ripple of power emerge.

Such incredible power! The mysterious leader of the sweeper battalion was already a top-notch expert of the wastelands, but in the face of the Bloodsoaked Queen he was absolutely nothing at all. He had just suffered a disastrous defeat!

The mysterious man himself hadn't imagined that the difference in power between them would be so great. There was simply no way to bridge the chasm between the two of them. Moments later, a tendril of fear suddenly snaked its way out from the depths of his soul, then spread like wildfire throughout his mind. He only had one thought left – flee!

He had been a fool. A complete fool! This woman was someone from that legendary place; even his master was slightly wary of her. How could a mere wastelander like himself possibly contend against her?

When Cloudhawk noticed that the man was about to flee, he immediately called out, "Hey, commander! He's gonna run for it!"

"Shut your fucking mouth! Are you trying to get yourself killed?" Slyfox immediately clamped his hands around Cloudhawk's mouth as beads of sweat appeared on his pudgy face. The power which the Bloodsoaked Queen had just displayed caused him to feel a sense of terror as well. "Don't ya know how the Bloodsoaked Queen got her nickname? D'ya really think yer in a position to be givin' her orders?"

The Bloodsoaked Queen had only been in the outpost for roughly a year, and for the vast majority of that time she was absent or hidden. And yet, her fame and prestige resoundingly eclipsed that of any captain. The Tartarus mercenaries were forced to humble themselves, while the members of the elite squad had all chosen to serve her and die for her! Why? Because of the overwhelming, crushing amount of power she possessed… as well as her absolutely cruel and dominating nature!

Anyone who had lived in Blackflag Outpost for more than a year would never be able to forget that horrifying battle from roughly a year ago.

The Queen was in no mood to pay any attention to trash like Cloudhawk, but she also completely ignored the terrified, fleeing sweeper leader. She silently unclipped the cross from her necklace, then gently lifted it up with her two hands. Moments later, she did something which caused everyone to feel completely astonished.

She went down to one knee.

She clasped the cross tightly in her hands, and she began to pray softly in an extremely sincere, devout voice. “O almighty gods of radiant light, I pray to thee with all my soul, with all my life, with all my heart. Please bestow your power upon thy child…” This prayer was filled with such sincerity and piety, but when it came out in that hoarse, sinister voice it truly sounded strange to the extreme.

The cross suddenly began to glow, and with each passing second it grew brighter and brighter! Cloudhawk’s eyes were about to pop out of their sockets. “What the hell is this?”

The Bloodsoaked Queen rose to her feet once more, then lifted the glowing cross high into the air. She looked almost like a holy paladin lifting up a blade which cast out demons… and when she brought the ‘sword’ down, the light completely disappeared into her palms, transforming into a blade-like arc of light that shot out dozens of meters, carving out a deep gouge in the earth as it shot off after the fleeing man.

The light washed over him, and it cut through him as though he was just a piece of paper. His body was cut in half from his right shoulder to his left flank. Momentum carried the two halves of his body forward by three meters, with the flesh around his terrifying wounds having turned completely black, as though charred by fire. This was perhaps the reason why he didn’t immediately die, and he struggled to claw forwards with his one remaining arm.

A pair of boots appeared in front of him. He lifted up his head, only to see that woman once more… but the fear actually began to slowly vanish from his eyes. Now that he knew he was going to die, that look of wild fervor began to fill his gaze once more. “I’m impressed, demonhunter!”

The Bloodsoaked Queen asked coldly, “Where is he?”

The dying, bisected man began to roar with laughter, but his laughter sounded like the bleating of a dying mountain goat. The Bloodsoaked Queen narrowed her eyes. She remained as cold and distant as ever, but her words were filled with menace. “Where. Is. He.”

“Are you afraid?” The dying man didn’t seem to understand the situation he was in. He roared in a hoarse and brash voice, “I’ll never tell you. Keep living in fear and pain. You will never be able to get your revenge. You-” But his voice suddenly cut off as a booted foot crushed his head into pulp.

The Queen turned towards the outpost warriors, her cloak fluttering in the air behind her. She seemed to move in a leisurely manner, but she actually moved with incredible speed. Moments later she vanished from everyone's field of vision, leaving behind only three words.

"Kill them all."

The outpost warriors immediately let out excited roars and howls. This was the might of their commander, the commander of Blackflag Outpost – she was invincible, unfathomable, and unbelievable! This was the second time the Queen had fought ever since she had taken over the outpost, and her power was absolutely stunning!

Even creatures as foolish as the sweepers realized that with this powerful female guarding Blackflag Outpost, there was no chance at all for them to take this place over!

"FOR BLACKFLAG OUTPOST!"

"KILL THEM ALL!"

Grizzly led the warriors of Blackflag Outpost in an inexorable, unstoppable charge. Yet another frenzied and bloody battle erupted, but this time it was the sweepers who were driven to despair and cornered like animals. The two sides fought bitterly, as though possessed by bloodlust and driven mad by rage, but there was no doubt as to what the end result would be.

Cloudhawk, however, was focused on the Queen's disappearing silhouette. There was no way she had won as easily as it had seemed! Cloudhawk had noticed that after she had used that final dazzling attack, it seemed as though something inside her body had been completely wrung dry, almost like a reservoir that had lost all of its water. Although she looked as cold and powerful as before, she had already reached her limits. He could sense that the ripples emanating from within her body had dropped down to an incredibly weak level.

Cloudhawk felt certain that if another powerful foe appeared, the Queen would have no chance to fight back at all. She was clearly very powerful; clearly, she could've slain the sweeper leader with ease using a much less taxing attack. Why, then, had she taken on such a huge risk in expending all of her energy to kill him in such a manner?

There was only one possible answer for this. She was putting on a false front, a show.

Cloudhawk suspected that this attack against the outpost wasn't as simple as it seemed. The sweepers had probably been employed or driven to launch this attack, and it was likely that the person hiding behind them was the one who had created that sandstorm at the very beginning. This battle most likely had nothing to do with the sweepers or Blackflag Outpost at all. Instead, it was a test, a little skirmish between two freaks who both possessed supernatural powers.

Still, what mattered was that this brutal battle was about to come to an end, thanks to the defeat of the sweeper leader. The surviving sweepers finally began to flee, abandoning their vehicles, their mounts, their weapons, and their equipment. All of those things were being claimed by Blackflag Outpost as spoils of war, and the outpost guards and mercenaries were all excitedly surrounding and claiming various piles of items as their own.

"Everyone else is charging forwards to get their share of the spoils." Slyfox stared at Cloudhawk as though he was an idiot. "But you don't seem interested at all. Do you have shit for brains?"

"The only thing I want right now is a good, long sleep." Cloudhawk's adrenaline rush had ended with the battle, and a wave of exhaustion had just come crashing down on him. How could he possibly have any energy or interest in running forward to pick up some spoils? Besides, he really didn't believe that these savage men would let a kid like him get anything nice!

Slyfox saw that Cloudhawk was indeed covered with wounds, and so he just waved his hands in an extremely impatient manner. "Fine, fine. Hurry up and fuck off already. Go to Mantis' workshop and get those wounds treated. I aint got any time to worry about your sorry ass." Cloudhawk nodded, then immediately departed from this noisy, boisterous scene of looting.

The rugged streets of Blackflag Outpost were quite silent. Mice and other animals were rustling through the weeds, occasionally popping their heads out. They were drawn by the stench of blood in the air. Right now, this place truly did look like a lifeless, barren wasteland.

Cloudhawk was extremely tired in body, mind, and soul. The beast wave and the sweeper battalion had been incredibly dangerous, and he was once more reminded that staying alive in the wastelands was no easy feat. There was no such thing as a truly safe harbor in the wastelands, not even in the outposts. They walked a thin line

between life and death, and the outposts themselves were fragile things.

Cloudhawk was starting to want to leave… and what he had seen today was reinforcing those budding thoughts. On one side, there was a hidden, unknown figure capable of controlling and creating sandstorms. On the other side, there was a Bloodsoaked Queen who wielded an inconceivable amount of power.

What feud existed between the two? Cloudhawk didn't know, and he didn't want to know. However, he knew that if two figures like them began to fight with Blackflag Outpost being their battlefield, this place would never be safe to live in. Today was just the beginning. Who knew what the future would bring?

But if he left the outpost, where would he go? The wastelands were so vast and endless as to engender a sense of despair, and they were so cruel that they could devour anyone's innocent dreams or ideals. Was there truly no such thing as a safe place to live in this vast world?

Just as Cloudhawk's tired mind was throwing out these random thoughts, he was suddenly able sense those faint ripples once more. They seemed very similar to the ripples he had sensed from the Queen. Cloudhawk frantically looked right and left, but was unable to see anyone at all. No one was here. Was this a hallucination caused by excessive blood loss?

Cloudhawk continued to carefully scrutinize the area. Finally, his gaze turned towards a small, unremarkable alleyway. Those strange ripples were coming from that direction. *No way.* That place was absolutely foul and filled with refuse and excrement. Who in the world would go there?

Cloudhawk wasn't certain what these ripples were, but felt certain that it wasn't just a hallucination. He decided to go over there and take a look… but when he did, he was badly startled by what he saw in front of him.

There was a human silhouette within the alleyway. The person was seated on the ground, half-slumped against the wall. The person's mask was turned directly towards Cloudhawk, and the deep eyes hidden beneath the mask seemed to be staring death at him. This was the terrifying woman he had seen just a short while ago… the Bloodsoaked Queen!

Cloudhawk's first instinct was to run. This freak of a woman had been able to crush

maneaters as easily as ants. To her, someone like Cloudhawk would be even less than an ant. But just as he took his first step to run, he suddenly halted.

The Queen's arms were resting on the ground, seemingly powerless, and a thin trickle of blood was actually streaming out from the edges of that savage mask. She remained slumped against the wall, not moving or making even the slightest of sounds.

Drip. Drip. Drops of crimson blood landed on her clothes, staining them with a large, bloody patch.

Was the Queen dead? No way!

Chapter 29
The Queens True Visage

Cloudhawk stared at her for another long moment, then carefully crept forwards to take a closer look. The Bloodsoaked Queen simply lay there, seeming completely lifeless. Blood continued to trickle out from underneath her mask, and she looked no different from a corpse.

Just a few moments ago, she had invincibly swept through all opposition! How was it that she had inexplicably perished just a few moments later? Cloudhawk stared at the Queen, his face filled with confusion. The savage mask was completely inscrutable, and nothing but darkness could be seen underneath the eye-sockets of the mask. He couldn't see her eyes at all, but he still felt as though he was being stared at. He couldn't help but shiver.

Cloudhawk's gaze slowly turned downwards, only to notice that her chest was slowly rising and falling by just the tiniest of amounts. The Queen was still breathing. That meant she wasn't dead yet! What had happened? Had she suffered a serious injury which caused her to pass out on the spot?

Cloudhawk felt certain that his guess was spot on. The Queen probably had already been injured; she had forced herself to put on a strong front when she dealt with the sweeper leader, and the reason she immediately left in such a hurry was because she knew that she was on the verge of passing out. And yet, before she managed to return to her own residence she passed out in this alleyway.

All of this was simply inconceivable! The almighty, invincible commander of Blackflag Outpost, the Bloodsoaked Queen, was lying here in the alleyway, completely helpless. Even someone as weak as Cloudhawk could do anything he pleased to her. If others discovered her or if word of her presence here spread, it would probably cause an enormous commotion.

The spoils didn't take too long to divvy up. Some people were already beginning to return to their homes in the outpost. The Bloodsoaked Queen was in a very dangerous position. There were assuredly many who were dissatisfied with her reign, and wastelanders were vicious and sly; there was no way they would give up such a golden

opportunity.

What was he to do? Should he simply ignore her and leave her to her fate? Cloudhawk's gaze paused for a few moments on her gloves and her cross. The minute vibrations emanating from them caused his heart to tremble as well.

By now, it was all but confirmed that the Bloodsoaked Queen's power came from those gloves and that cross. She was able to use that strange energy in her body to activate these unique items, giving birth to incredibly destructive forces.

Cloudhawk reached up, clutching his stone necklace in his hands. This stone of his was definitely an extraordinary item, but he hadn't been able to find the proper way to use it. Cloudhawk couldn't help but wonder… was there some sort of a connection between the Queen's special equipment and his stone? If he could learn her abilities, would he gain access to supernatural abilities like her? This prospect was incredibly enticing to him.

The stone really hadn't done much during the past month. He was in desperate need of someone sufficiently knowledgeable who could teach him about it.

No, no way. This is crazy dangerous. Her nickname is the Bloodsoaked Queen! That name alone proves that she's not exactly a nice person. Even Slyfox was extremely wary of her! Given how powerful this woman was, it was entirely possible that she would recover within minutes. If Cloudhawk decided to be a busybody… he could almost imagine what would happen.

Perhaps it was best to leave. There was nothing more important than staying alive. *She's neither family nor friend. None of my damn business if she lives or dies.* Even if he did save the Queen, she wouldn't necessarily show him any gratitude… and even if she was grateful, she wouldn't necessarily teach him her techniques. And even if she DID teach him her techniques, they might not be useful in activating that special stone!

The risks here were enormous. The more Cloudhawk thought about it, the more he felt it wasn't worth it. It was better to not get involved and to leave immediately.

He had made up his mind, and he was going to leave immediately. If the Queen suddenly woke up and saw him lurking around here, she would probably wipe him out without a second thought. To her, it would probably be as easy as crushing a bug! But just as Cloudhawk turned to leave, he was suddenly arrested in his tracks.

Wait a second! Cloudhawk suddenly thought back to those strange words the mysterious man had said. The Bloodsoaked Queen seemed to have a unique background. She wasn't from Blackflag Outpost; in fact, she wasn't even a wastelander. Then… where did she come from? Was there actually something beyond the wastelands? If there was… what type of a world was it? Had that dreamy world of the Old Times truly been completely destroyed?

Ever since his earliest days, Cloudhawk's greatest dream was to leave the wastelands. Blackflag Outpost was nothing more than a temporary residence for him. Cloudhawk felt certain that he would leave this place, sooner or later, and embark on a journey through the wastes. If he continued to just remain here as a mercenary, he would be trapped in the wastelands for all his life. In the end he would die a meaningless death and turn into yet another wastelands corpse, as he had in that dream.

Saving this woman carried inherent risks; there was no question about that at all. But… there was no way he would have a second opportunity at this. Was he really going to give up his one and only chance?

Cloudhawk felt as though his head was exploding. Countless conflicting thoughts were clashing in his head, smashing together like meteors and creating countless sparks. In the end, one desire blazed hotter and hotter, becoming so powerful that it completely overwhelmed all of his other worries.

"Fuck it. If I die, I die!" Cloudhawk grabbed a piece of tattered cloth, covered the Queen with it, then lifted her onto his back.

This woman was terrifyingly powerful, capable of stopping blades with her bare hands. But right now, she was so weak that she didn't seem to have so much as a single bone in her body. She was like a soft, elastic ball of cotton… and this was doubly true for her ample, perky bosom which pressed against him. Although Cloudhawk's young age meant that he didn't really understand much about the affairs between men and women, he knew that no wastelander woman could ever be like her.

Thunk. Cloudhawk used his leg to kick open the battered door to his wooden residence, then piggy-back carried the Queen in, his forehead matted with sweat. He first put her down on his bed, then ran outside to scan the area. After verifying that no one had trailed him back or had noticed him, he carefully crept back inside and shut the door.

Cloudhawk sat there in front of his bed, his mind a complete blank. He was still uneasy, and he didn't know if he had made the correct decision or not. The Bloodsoaked Queen was someone who cut down men like grass. Last year, she had killed the previous commander as soon as she arrived at Blackflag Outpost, then used absolutely bloody methods to wipe out any who dared oppose her rule. She had then established iron order upon the outpost, and no one who dared to violate her rules would be spared!

She was like a chunk of cold iron, a cold-blooded tyrant. However, Cloudhawk hadn't experienced any of that himself, and so he didn't really truly 'know' what she was like. But if Slyfox knew what he had just done, Slyfox would've been so furious that he unquestionably would've executed Cloudhawk with a single shot.

Did the kid really think that the Queen would be grateful to him just because he had saved her? When she woke up… in order to preserve her image of invincibility and her rule, the very first thing she would do would be to get rid of this busybody kid. Honestly, he was probably the only person in the entire outpost who would make such a stupid decision.

And it really was a stupid decision! Even Cloudhawk knew it, but he felt he had no choice. The allure of the outside world was simply too great for him. He desperately wanted to learn more about what lay outside the wastes.

Can I become as strong as the Queen? Will my dreams end up as just that; empty dreams that will never be realized? Is there really a 'heaven' that exists outside the wastelands, or is there nothing more than an even greater wasteland?

Cloudhawk felt extremely nervous and restless. Not only was he worried about how the Queen would react, he was worried about if his dream would vanish like a popped bubble. He wasn't satisfied with living an ant's life, with simply surviving one day at a time. He wanted to live, to truly live. He wouldn't give up any chance of that!

Deep breaths, buddy. Deep breaths. Cloudhawk forced himself to calm down, then wiped his face and stood up.

What sort of a face lay under that savage mask? An equally savage, hideous, and violent one? Did she look like a monster, with glaring fangs and a savage mien? But in this era and in this place, not even the most hideous, monstrous, and disgusting of faces would cause Cloudhawk to feel even a hint of surprise.

Cloudhawk took a deep breath, summoning all his courage and tamping down the fear in his heart. He then reached out to lift the mask up, wanting to satisfy his curiosity… and he was thunderstruck by what he saw.

Cloudhawk's eyes bulged out, and his entire face froze. He stared blankly at the face in front of him. Not even in his wildest dreams would he have imagined that a face like this was hidden behind that terrifying, savage mask.

Willowy eyebrows, almond-shaped eyes, cherry-red lips… this was the epitome of classical beauty. The woman had a high nose, and a head of long and smooth night-black hair. She was tall and slender but had curves in all the right places. She truly had every single trait of Asian standards of beauty, and when you factored in her absolutely alabaster-white skin… she truly was flawless and without blemish.

The demonic Bloodsoaked Queen, who the members of Blackflag Outpost venerated like a god, had the youthful face of a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old girl. Her eyes were tightly shut, her long eyelashes were fluttering slightly, and she was wincing slightly as though she was in pain. Even the most hard-hearted of men would feel a desire to protect and cherish her.

This maiden was several years older than Cloudhawk, but Cloudhawk had never seen anyone as beautiful as her. She couldn't even be spoken of in the same breath as the ugly, coarse humans of the wastelands. She truly was like an angel that had fallen from the heavens. No one would ever conflate the merciless, murderous Bloodsoaked Queen with this statuesque, jade-like beauty.

This world really was a crazy place! Cloudhawk grabbed a towel, then used it to help clean her bloodstained face. He moved with the utmost of caution and care, as though he was cleansing a priceless work of art.

The Queen's beautiful crimson lips trembled a few times, and a wince of pain once more appeared on her surpassingly beautiful features. Cloudhawk hurriedly went to find some water, bringing it to the Queen's lips. The Queen gulped down water in large mouthfuls before the anguished look on her face slowly relaxed, but she still did not wake up.

Cloudhawk removed the gloves from her hands. As he did so, he sensed a strange type of power tremble through them. These gloves clearly were no ordinary gloves; otherwise, how could they possibly have allowed her to block that world-shattering

knife-strike with them?

With the gloves gone, a bloody scar was now visible within the Queen's right hand. Her fair, tender skin had been cut open. It seemed as though using her hand to block that strike hadn't been as simple as it had appeared. Cloudhawk ran over to Mantis' workshop, grabbed some medicine, bandages, and tools, then ran back and helped bind the Queen's wounds in a simple manner.

But her wounds definitely weren't limited to the external ones he could see. She had definitely suffered heavier injuries than he had imagined, and she had been unconscious for much longer than he had expected. Thankfully, he had brought her back. Otherwise, she definitely would've been discovered in that alleyway by someone else. There was a limit to what Cloudhawk could do. Right now, her life was in her own hands.

As Cloudhawk sat down to relax, he couldn't help but turn to look at the Queen's chest. It was virtually impossible for wastelander women to have such a voluptuous figure, simply because there wasn't enough food for most of them. However, the young Cloudhawk wasn't really interested in her chest, nor did he have any evil designs on her. What really attracted his attention was that white cross.

Now that was a truly powerful item. The Queen had used it to chop the sweeper leader in half! Cloudhawk reached out towards it, wanting to take a closer look at it… but right at that moment, the Queen's tightly shut eyes suddenly opened.

Oh, shit.

Cloudhawk was caught completely off-guard. His hand was right over the Queen's chest, and it was far too late for him to draw back.

Fast. Incomprehensibly fast! The Queen's slender, jade-like right hand struck out with lightning speed, latching onto Cloudhawk's wrist and trapping it with the power of a steel vise, then gave it a sharp tug.

Ow ow ow OW! Cloudhawk didn't even have a chance to cry out before his head was sent smashing straight into the headboard. An icy aura instantly filled the entire room as though a blizzard had suddenly descended upon it as waves of undisguised, murderous rage seemed to crash down upon Cloudhawk!

Chapter 30
The Children of the Gods

The Bloodsoaked Queen hadn't completely lost all consciousness. Even though she had been nearly insensate, she had still been able to maintain a strand of conscious thought. She had felt as though she had fallen into an endless black hole of darkness, pain, and exhaustion. She was like someone who was drowning into a bottomless pool of water; no matter how she struggled, there was nothing she could do. This sense of despair had been dragging her further and further downwards, and that stifling sensation caused her will to suffer.

To fall into that endless slumber would be a form of escape. Why did she have to live while weighed down by so many burdens? But as soon as this thought appeared, a thought that was a thousand times more powerful instantly arose and overwhelmed it:

No. I cannot die! My mission is not yet complete. I cannot fall before I have done what I sought out to do! I must find him and kill him, not just for revenge, not just to cleanse my clan's reputation, but because it is my responsibility as a child of the gods… and my mission as a demonhunter! If I have to die, I'll die a glorious death in battle, not a shameful death in a place like this!

"Almighty gods, please give your devout follower the strength to uphold my convictions!"

It seemed as though the Bloodsoaked Queen's resolute, pious prayer had been effective. Energy poured into her exhausted, enervated frame, allowing her to regain partial consciousness. Alas, her mind was still fogged and she wasn't able to move in the slightest. She could only sense that she was now in a completely foreign environment.

Someone was walking back and forth in the area around her. The person actually used a moist cloth to wipe away at her face. This caused the Queen to feel both rage and terror. These were the gods-forsaken wastelands. If she ended up falling under the control of these ugly, vile, and brutish wastelanders while she was too weak to fight back… she didn't even dare imagine what was going to happen to her!

The Bloodsoaked Queen was unable to control any part of her body; she couldn't do so much as twitch her fingers. Gradually, her mind once more began to sink into that dazed fugue state, but the fiery pain in her throat caused her to feel extremely miserable. Water. She needed water…

A while later, she felt something cool and refreshing being poured into her mouth. She instinctively gulped at the water, feeling that fiery sensation in her throat slowly subside. Her body now felt much more comfortable than before, and as a result she once more fell into a deep slumber.

By the time she woke up once more, she had already regained part of her strength. When she suddenly opened her clear, jewel-bright eyes, the first thing she saw was a dilapidated ceiling that had cracks in it, allowing her to clearly see the light of the stars spilling in from outside.

It was night time? She had actually been passed out for nearly an entire day! But before she had a chance to think on what this meant, she suddenly saw a dirty hand begin to furtively stretch out towards her chest. This caused every slumbering cell within the Queen's body to awaken and burst with furious power. She leapt to her feet with the agility of a female panther, then grabbed that offending, impudent hand with thunderbolt speed and pulled it backwards, hard.

As for her other hand, she used it to press down on the bastard's head. The Queen poured all of her power into that right hand of hers… but the head did not instantly explode into countless pieces. Which was odd. Only now did the Queen realize, to her astonishment, that her right hand was now wrapped in dirty, crude bandages which smelled faintly of medicine. Her gloves had already been removed.

Cloudhawk could immediately and clearly sense those strange ripples emanating from the Queen's body. There was no mistaking it; it was this power which allowed her to use her strange equipment!

If I hadn't removed her gloves to treat her wounds, my fucking head would've been burnt to a cinder by now.

This woman really was a nasty character!

"Calm down, calm down! I'm just an ordinary mercenary of Blackflag Outpost." Cloudhawk was in so much pain that large beads of sweat had formed on his forehead.

“I saw you had passed out, so I brought you back to treat your wounds. I didn’t do anything else, honest!”

“Shut up!” The Queen was still gripped by shock and rage; clearly, she didn’t believe him. Her voice, however, was extremely pleasant to the ear; it sounded like the tinkling of fine jade or the singing of a bird. It carried an alluring, magnetic quality to it. Although her voice was quite cold, it also contained undisguisable hints of her youthfulness. The demonic mask definitely contained some sort of voice-altering mechanism.

The Bloodsoaked Queen could sense that her body was still very weak. She wasn’t sure how long she would be able to maintain her current state, and so she immediately began to study her surroundings.

She was in a small, crude, and dilapidated wooden room that was so small there was almost no place to stand. There was a battered wooden desk that had a damaged clay basin atop it, and a bloody towel which was soaking inside the basin. The surrounding area was strewn with ripped ribbons, and there was also a half-filled bottle of an unknown liquid that emanated a strange medicinal fragrance.

As for the person in her hands, he was a half-grown boy of fifteen years of age. He wasn’t very tall, but he was extremely thin. His black hair was tousled and his entire body was covered with filth as well as wounds. Some of the wounds were old, some were new. He looked the same as any of the other wastelanders she had seen, but there was an alert, honest look in his eyes that made him seem like a decent person.

“Who else saw me?” The Queen could sense her body growing weaker and weaker, and she couldn’t help but slightly loosen her grip over Cloudhawk. In the wastelands, only the law of survival of the fittest applied. If anyone else saw how weak and powerless she was right now, things would turn grim for her. “Speak!”

“N-no one! Everyone was busy divvying up the spoils from the sweepers. I found you in an alleyway and secretly brought you back. Nobody else saw you besides me.” Cloudhawk knew exactly what the Queen was worried about. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell a soul. No one will know that you’ve been injured.”

The Bloodsoaked Queen’s eyes narrowed into slits, but not out of anger; rather, she was just too tired and too weak, so weak that she no longer had the strength to keep him pressed down. Her vise-like grip loosened around his elbow, and Cloudhawk

immediately scurried several steps backwards.

The Bloodsoaked Queen hurriedly tore off the bandages and put on her powerful gloves, but from start to finish her wary gaze had yet to leave Cloudhawk. She first moved to the doorway, scanning the outside area and making sure that there was no one else hidden nearby. She then inspected herself. Her clothes seemed to be in good shape, and there was no sign that anything inappropriate had happened. Had the kid been telling the truth?

Cloudhawk shrugged helplessly. “Now can you trust me?”

“Why were you following me?!” The Queen’s voice was still filled with cold hostility. There was no way someone would’ve found her ‘by coincidence’ immediately after she passed out. “What are you scheming? Who are you!”

Cloudhawk hesitated for a moment, but when he saw that murderous look in her eyes he hurriedly explained, “I d-d-didn’t! You got it all wrong. Your gloves and your cross were emanating a strange sound that I could hear from far away. I followed them and was able to find you.”

The Queen’s face turned dark. “Lying to me will result in a very painful death.”

“I’m telling the truth, I swear! I can hear sounds coming from the gloves and the cross.” Cloudhawk could sense that she really was at the very verge of killing him. A sudden thought crossed his panicked mind, and he immediately called out, “I know that there was someone else outside the outpost who also had powers like yours, and I was able to hear him coming as well!”

The Bloodsoaked Queen paused, startled. This didn’t seem plausible at all. She had never heard of anything like this before! Her face slowly turned calmer, but her wariness didn’t lessen one bit as she allowed Cloudhawk to continue to speak. “That person didn’t show himself, but I know that he was the one who summoned the sandstorm. I’m right, aren’t I? I’m really not lying to you!”

“Then tell me, what sort of sound can you hear?”

“It sounds like guitar strings being plucked. It has a very unique rhythm to it.” Cloudhawk closed his eyes, carefully attuning himself to those sounds. “Each piece of equipment has a different sound, a very strange song.”

“How could a heathen wastelander abandoned by the gods possibly hear the song of my sacred relics? Not even legendary demonhunters have such an ability! Are you truly a wastelander?” The Bloodsoaked Queen stared intently at him, searching for a weakness or a hint of deception in his young face. In truth, her desire to kill him had not lessened in the slightest. If she saw the slightest hint of artifice, she would immediately attack without any hesitation or remorse.

Cloudhawk nodded dumbly, a look of complete sincerity in his eyes. He didn’t look like he was lying or holding anything back at all. However, he suddenly seemed to think of something as a look of dazzling excitement appeared in his eyes. He asked in a rather urgent manner, “You called me a ‘heathen wastelander’. That means there’s more to this world than just the wastelands. Are there places outside the wastelands?”

The Bloodsoaked Queen said coldly, “That is none of your concern!”

“No. I must know. Please tell me, where did you come from?” Cloudhawk was so excited that he actually forgot his fear of her. “What is that place like?”

Does this kid not realize the situation he is in? The Bloodsoaked Queen truly was very fragile and weak right now, but if she wanted to get rid of this kid she would be able to do it with ease. However, when the kid stared at her she could see the hope and desire in his gaze. The emotions and dreams he held in his heart seemed to be pure and completely free of any doubt whatsoever, and his eyes were filled with the same resolute faith as that of the true believers when they bowed towards Sumeru, the mountain of the gods.

A foul, despicable heathen who had been abandoned by the gods shouldn’t be able to have a gaze like this… and yet, he was most surely destined to live and die within the wastelands!

“I come from a land which is blessed by the light of the gods. The gods have created countless miracles in our world, and the land they have blessed is both fertile and bountiful, allowing those who live off that land to want for nothing. The gods bestowed us with intelligence and wisdom, letting all live peaceful lives of joy and leisure. There is no pain there, no sickness, no murder…”

That’s it. That’s the place. That’s the place I’ve been dreaming of, ever since I was young! The place which Cloudhawk had fantasized about for so long really did exist! Cloudhawk felt dazed, but he also felt a ball of fire burning brightly within his chest. It

was like he was a lost wanderer who had suddenly found his bearings again, as though a world of darkness had suddenly been cleft apart by a flicker of light. “Can I go there?”

“Hah! In your dreams!” The Queen’s response was like a bucket of ice water being poured over him, dousing his excitement. She glanced at the kid in front of her with a look of utter contempt. “This place is a thousand miles away from Elysium. What makes you think you are strong enough to even get there? Putting that aside, what makes you think a lowly heathen like yourself would ever be permitted to bathe in the glory of the gods?”

But her words had no effect. Cloudhawk had already decided that no matter how hard the journey was or how far he had to travel, he would still go to that distant place. “What of you?” Cloudhawk hesitated a short moment, then asked her the question. “You are from that place. Why did you abandon it to come to the…”

Cloudhawk could tell that the Queen was an extremely proud person. She was looking at Cloudhawk as though he was a rat she had just fished out of a sewer! If she hated the wastelands this much, if her world really was so perfect and pure, then what had driven her to abandon this ‘land of the faithful’ which she was so proud of? What had driven her to come here, to the dangerous, filthy, and barbaric wastelands, and stay here for over a year? Why had she chosen to live her life in this rat-infested outpost?

But Cloudhawk fell silent before he could finish his question. A bone-piercing chill had just filled the small room, and he felt certain that the actual temperature had just dropped by several degrees. He sensed an all-consuming hatred radiating from the Queen, an uncontrollable desire to kill that was mixed in with unspeakable grief. If Cloudhawk hadn’t personally experienced this feeling, he never would’ve believed that this beautiful woman, as perfect as a work of art, was capable of radiating an aura that was every bit as baleful and murderous as the most savage of wasteland beasts!

The Bloodsoaked Queen’s eyes had been completely filled with cold hatred. She ground her teeth, then said something which Cloudhawk did not comprehend whatsoever:

“I am hunting a demon!”

Chapter 31
A Dangerous Woman

She had left those fertile lands which had been blessed by the gods, travelling alone.

This was the reason why.

She was only sixteen years of age, but she had discarded her noble birth and her glorious future.

This was the reason why.

She had entered the gods-forsaken wastelands, spending more than a year of her life in this place.

This was the reason why.

The Bloodsoaked Queen knew that her mission was a deadly one, but as a pious warrior, an exalted demonhunter, and a child of the glorious gods, she had long ago lost all her fear of death!

“What are you talking about?” Cloudhawk had no idea what she was saying. He scratched his head. “What’s a ‘demon’?” But as soon as he spoke, he regretted it. The Queen turned a disdainful, appalled look towards him, as though she was staring at a mosquito that knew about nothing save buzzing in an irritating fashion. This feeling was quite an unpleasant one.

The Queen let out a cold snort. Wastelanders were ignorant and foolish beyond belief. They were faithless and had no sense of honor whatsoever. They knew not of the grace of the gods, nor did they know of the vileness of the demons. The Queen felt that she was committing a great sin just speaking with such a heathen; it was as though conversing with him was a form of blasphemy against the divine spirits.

But then, a feeling of exhaustion and powerlessness once more swept over her. She wasn’t sure how much longer she would be able to remain standing; there was no way she could waste any more time here. Right now, she had to immediately leave this

place. She turned her gaze towards the young wastelander, slight hesitation in her eyes. Mixed emotions flashed through her gaze before it finally turned as hard and cold as steel.

Oh, fuck. She still wants to silence me?! Cloudhawk hurriedly took a few steps back. "What are you doing?!"

The Bloodsoaked Queen said coldly, "I cannot let anyone find out about my injuries. Once this information is leaked, it is possible that the entire Blackflag Outpost will be butchered almost immediately. I have to get rid of any chance of this happening… but fear not. You die in the service of the gods, and so I will pray for your soul and ensure that in your next life, you shall be born as one of the blessed citizens of the sacred elysian lands."

"Are you serious? This is so completely unfair."

The Bloodsoaked Queen ignored his protestations, taking a single step forwards. Cloudhawk could clearly sense a type of ripple emerge from the Queen's gloves and enter the air around him. When the ripples spread out, they clashed with the various material particles in the air, causing every single air particle to vibrate at a different frequency than before. That thrumming sound once more filled his ears.

A flame appeared out of nowhere within the Queen's hands.

Cloudhawk was now thoroughly stunned. What type of power was this?! Still, this didn't seem to be the right time to find out. Cloudhawk called out frantically, "I saved your life! Are people from the elysian lands all as ungrateful and treacherous as you? Is this how the 'gods' you speak of teach you to treat people who helped you out?"

"Thus sayeth the gods: The blood of the wastelands is most foul, and there is no need to show wastelanders any mercy at all!" The Queen's movements began to speed up. "And I cannot take any risks!"

Her face was turning pale once more, and a few beads of sweat could be seen atop her fair, snow-white skin. She was doing her best to suppress the agony which was wracking her body. As the ripples emanating from her gloves began to increase in power, the air around her began to vibrate more intensely than before, resulting in a heat wave emanating from around her.

The runes on the Queen's gloves were already lit up. She was ready to strike… but

Cloudhawk wasn't going to just sit there and wait for death. As the Queen reached out at frightening speeds to grab him, he suddenly shouted loudly, "Slyfox! Save me!"

Eh?! The Queen hesitated slightly. Slyfox was a famous member of Blackflag Outpost, legendary for his craftiness and his schemes. Was he nearby? The Queen was momentarily distracted by this possibility, and Cloudhawk seized the moment to pounce straight towards her like a leopard.

Damn. What a sly fellow! The Bloodsoaked Queen immediately reached out towards him once more. Her gloves held enough power to burn a maneater into charcoal; if she so much as brushed this wastelander kid with it, he would instantly be burnt into a crisp.

Cloudhawk hurriedly dodged sideways, the gloves just barely missing his shoulders. The Queen was every bit as skilled as Mad Dog, and she was possibly even stronger; otherwise, how could she have been able to receive that thunderous blow from the sweeper leader with her bare hand? However, she was so weak right now that her movements were far slower than normal.

Bang! As Cloudhawk dodged her attacked, he punched her right in her perfect face. *Hard.* As someone who had grown up in the wastelands, he had never heard of the concept of 'chivalry'. Who gave a fuck that she was a 'peerless beauty'? The only thing Cloudhawk knew and cared about was that she was trying to kill him. If he didn't fight as hard as he could, he'd definitely be the one to die… and so he really did hit her with everything he had, smacking her so hard that she saw stars.

"You bastard!" The Bloodsoaked Queen was filled with a towering rage. She had never imagined that this wastelander brat would be so alert and so audacious. She was a demonhunter, a warrior of the gods… and she had just been smacked in the face by an underage, half-grown wastelander boy. What an utter humiliation!

"That's what happens when you try to backstab people who helped you out!" Cloudhawk hadn't expected to actually land his attack, and his unexpected success was a huge morale boost to him. If this woman was gonna go after him, then he was going to knock her on her ass before she had a chance to recover her full strength. After knocking her out, he'd tie her up and try to figure out what to do with her.

Cloudhawk was not the spineless, cowardly type. How could a coward possibly spend all his time dreaming about leaving the wastelands and entering an unknown world?

He aimed his second punch straight at the Queen's tall, graceful nose!

The Bloodsoaked Queen dodged his attack, seeming to move slowly but somehow managing to just barely avoid his punch as she reached out with her right hand and latched onto Cloudhawk's wrist. The Queen had undergone formal combat training; even in the bad shape she was currently in, she had more than enough oomph left to deal with a half-trained brat like this!

Crap! Cloudhawk was so terrified that he felt as though his soul was about to leave his body. The Bloodsoaked Queen might have almost no power left, but what she did have was enough to finish him off! Cloudhawk could clearly sense a ripple or a vibration emanate from her gloves, undulating in a serpentine fashion as it spread across his entire body. This power was capable of affecting every single tiny particle in his body, causing them to vibrate at a frequency which would generate tremendously high temperatures and heat.

What type of attack was this? How was this attack formed? Cloudhawk had no idea, nor did he care to find out at a time like this. He only had one thought in his mind: *Oh, fuck. I'm gonna be charcoaled.*

But just as Cloudhawk felt absolutely certain that his doom was nigh, he suddenly felt a resonant response coming from the stone around his neck. It sucked in all of the strange energy the Bloodsoaked Queen was pouring into his body via her glove, almost like a sponge sucking in water.

What's going on? Why is my energy disappearing as soon as it is going into the kid's body? The Bloodsoaked Queen had never encountered something like this before, and for a moment she was caught completely off-guard… and a heartbeat later, an ice-cold object was pressed straight against her chest.

"Don't move an inch." Cloudhawk was holding a crude, ungainly shotgun in his hands. Although large beads of sweat had accumulated on his brows, his gaze was completely focused on the Bloodsoaked Queen. "I'm feeling really trigger-happy right now."

The Queen's gaze flickered a few times, then she said in a very calm voice, "Then go ahead and pull it."

Cloudhawk suddenly felt a sharp object pressing against his own chest. He glanced downwards… and his eyes bulged out. The Queen had somehow pulled out a short

dart without him even realizing it. If she pushed it forward by so much as half an inch, it would go straight into his heart.

Cloudhawk forced out a smile. “That little thing? It might or might not be able to kill me… but I don’t think you’ll survive a shotgun blast to the face.”

The Queen said coldly, “I’m betting that your gun isn’t loaded!”

Cloudhawk’s shotgun really wasn’t loaded. The Bloodsoaked Queen’s guess was spot-on, but Cloudhawk didn’t let any of it show on his face or in his eyes. Instead, he applied a bit more pressure to the trigger, as though he truly was ready to fire at any moment.

The Bloodsoaked Queen had wanted to trick Cloudhawk into revealing something, but the wastelander kid was much stronger mentally than she had imagined. Although she felt that it was likely that this shotgun had no pellets in it, given the situation she didn’t dare to act rashly either. The Queen wasn’t afraid of dying. What she feared was dying without meaning!

Cloudhawk was feeling nervous as well. He knew very well that he was putting on a false front right now. The Queen might be very weak, but Cloudhawk didn’t believe that he’d be able to beat her in a fight. A dying tiger was still a tiger; even in its death-throes, it wouldn’t be beaten by a mosquito, much less a half-grown one!

What should he do? Cloudhawk had no idea as to how he should break this stalemate! But just as the tension was building to a crescendo, peals of laughter suddenly rang out from afar. The mercenaries had come back. Cloudhawk could hear Slyfox guffawing merrily, and some of the mercenaries were actually calling out to him:

“Brat! Brat! Get out here!”

“Come take a look at what we brought ya!”

This time, it was the Queen who turned pale. Slyfox really had arrived! He was an extraordinarily talented, sly, and vicious man. Given the shape the Queen was in, there was no way she could fight him right now, much less the many other mercenaries Slyfox had brought with him. If she was discovered… she didn’t even want to imagine what would happen.

Damn. What was she to do? Was she really about to perish by the hands of these filthy

wastelander heathens?

Cloudhawk could see the blood draining from the Queen's beautiful face, and he could also hear the footsteps of the mercenaries drawing closer and closer. Countless thoughts flashed through his mind. He knew exactly what type of person that fat bastard was; Slyfox was completely unscrupulous, vicious, and a notorious lecher. Who knew what would happen if the Queen fell into his hands?

"Hey!" Cloudhawk put down the shotgun. "Hide!"

The Queen was slightly startled. She had been planning to kill him… but he still wanted to help her?

Cloudhawk stared at her. "I can't let you die yet! Hurry up and hide. If Slyfox sees you, you'll be screwed. He's a total pervert!" Slyfox's lecherous nature wasn't exactly a secret; virtually everyone in the base knew it. But the problem was, Cloudhawk's tiny room had nothing more than a shabby bed and a rickety table, and those things took up virtually all of his space. There was nowhere to hide someone!

"Onto the bed!" By now, the mercenary footsteps were coming from just a few meters away. Cloudhawk had no time to consider anything else; he suddenly pushed the Queen onto his bed, covered her with his grungy blankets, then lay down on the bed as well. The bed was a tiny one, and so the two were forced to squeeze together to fit on it.

How could she possibly be 'hidden' on the bed? They'd have to be blind not to notice her! But the Queen had no time to react, because the door to the room had just been kicked open. A heartbeat later, Slyfox swaggered straight inside.

Cloudhawk hurriedly squeezed closer towards her. The Bloodsoaked Queen was actually a bit taller than him, and her figure was both slender and curvaceous, her form both soft and firm. Cloudhawk had the clear feeling that he was lying next to a female leopard that was capable of exploding with tremendous power at any moment.

This was the first time for him to be in such close contact with a woman. Cloudhawk felt nervous, but he also felt some other strange feelings rippling through his heart. This was a completely new sensation for him, but he was in no mood to savor it. The woman was simply too dangerous!

She suddenly snaked her arm out around him, pressing herself tightly against him

from behind. It looked as though she was embracing him under the covers, a very intimate and loving gesture. This was the first time for the half-grown Cloudhawk to experience the feeling of a young, lithe, and beautiful woman pressing against him… but he had no time to enjoy it, because the Queen had just pressed something cold, slick, and sharp directly against his throat. If he so much as moved the wrong way, something very, very bad was going to happen to him.

This crazy bitch still doesn't trust me?!

Chapter 32
Purposeful Poisoning

“Fuck, kid, why haven’t you lit the lamps?” Slyfox boomed loudly as he squeezed his fat figure into the small room.

Cloudhawk could sense the softness of the Queen’s body, the warmth of her breath against his neck… and the hardness of the sharp weapon her long, slender hands were pressing against his neck from beneath the grungy covers.

Shocked? Horrified? Tense?

Cloudhawk didn’t know how to describe his current state of mind. It was an inexplicable, indescribable type of sensation, and even he didn’t know what he was feeling right now.

Slyfox let out a rather irritated snort. “Are you dead? Say something! And why are you still on the bed? Get your ass up!”

“What do you want?” Cloudhawk didn’t dare to show that anything was off, much less leave the bed. He said in an intentionally feeble voice, “I need to rest. Stop bothering me!”

“Fuck that! You just got nicked a few times. Since when have you been such a wimp? Don’t you want your share of the spoils?” Slyfox walked over, tossing a large silver coat of fur over towards Cloudhawk. It was actually a very complete wolf pelt! Judging from the size of the thing, it had to have been skinned from the alpha rotwolf. “Check it out. This is a really great piece of fur; its both warm and tough. You can even make it into a suit of top-notch leather armor. Man, you really should be thanking your lucky stars. Oh yeah, you can keep the shotgun too. Consider that part of your spoils.”

“What the hell? These things belonged to me to begin with!” Cloudhawk had been the one to kill the alpha rotwolf, and he had found the shotgun on the field of battle. The fat bastard was acting like he was giving Cloudhawk some nice gifts when in reality he was just giving Cloudhawk things that were rightfully his to begin with!

“Don’t be a brat. Do you think you would’ve gotten anything at all if I hadn’t fought over them for you? Hey, I’m talking to you! Why the fuck are you still lying…” Slyfox’s words suddenly trailed off as he noticed what was happening on the bed. Although the room was very dim and he couldn’t make out many details, he could still tell that someone was lying next to Cloudhawk, most likely a woman. Judging from her posture, she was cuddling the little bastard.

A perplexed yet amused look suddenly appeared on Slyfox’s face. “Ohoho! So you’ve finally learned to have some fun, eh? Hidin’ a woman in your room… lemme take a look at her.”

They’d been discovered! The Queen tensed even further, pressing the dart slightly harder against Cloudhawk’s neck. Cloudhawk felt as though the dart was about to stab straight through his skin. He immediately began to sweat heavily as he called out, “Who I’m sleeping with is none of your business! I-I… I’m naked. Get the fuck outta here!”

“HAH! No wonder you are in such a pissy mood. I get pissed too when someone interrupts me mid-shag. We’re all men. I get it, I get it! But y’know, that woman of yours seems to have a really nice body. How does she look? Is she a slut? Lemme take a look. Hell, I’ll teach you a few moves on the spot. I’m a grandmaster in this area, y’know.”

The Queen began to tremble, her rage and her frustration having reached a boiling point. As for Cloudhawk, he felt so frightened that his soul was at the verge of fleeing from his body. This fat fucking bastard was about to get him killed. He hurriedly shouted, “Fatass, are you trying to steal my woman from me?”

“WHAT!? You no-good sonufa… do you have any idea how many women I got? Why the fuck would I try to take yours, you brat?” Slyfox seemed to have been truly affronted by this suggestion, and he instantly started to curse at Cloudhawk. “I was plannin’ to invite you to the banquet we’re holdin’, but since yer busy dealin’ with this woman I’ll leave you to it. Let’s get the hell outta here, guys.”

Still grumbling and cursing, Slyfox left the room. The mercenaries outside all began to let out mocking shouts.

“So the kid found a woman for himself?”

“My mind is completely blown!”

Quite a few of them craned to stare inwards with depraved looks in their eyes, curious as to what type of woman this half-grown brat could possibly find.

“Stop staring. He’s probably a virgin. How the hell is he gonna stay hard with all y’all staring at him?” Slyfox let out a loud guffaw. “Plenty of women in the world!” The mercenaries roared with laughter as they left.

With the mercenaries gone, Cloudhawk let out a relieved sigh. Moments later, he tensed up again. He immediately said to the woman behind him, “Don’t get mad at me. I just wanted to get them outta here as soon as I could. I’m sorry if I offended you.”

The Queen’s hand suddenly slumped down powerlessly. She made no response at all! Cloudhawk couldn’t help but use his elbow to nudge her slightly. “They left already!” The Queen slowly began to curl into a fetal position, still not saying a single word. Something was wrong!

Cloudhawk turned to look at her. Only now did Cloudhawk realize that her face was ashen, and that her lips were blue. A few strands of her black hair had been plastered to her face by sweat, and her entire body was trembling slightly. It looked as though she was gripped by tremendous pain.

“Is the injury acting up again?” Cloudhawk hurriedly lit a lamp, only to see that her teeth were tightly clenched. She clearly wasn’t in the mood to worry about the rather disrespectful words he had said earlier. Cloudhawk looked at her closely. “Where were you hurt?”

Cloudhawk swept the Queen’s lithesome form with his gaze. He noticed that there were a number of holes in the front of her clothes, and he immediately pulled them open, revealing a number of wounds across her taut, firm belly. The wounds weren’t that deep, but they looked badly infected. The once-white skin around the wounds had already turned dark and purple.

What was going on here?

CRACK! The Queen delivered a stinging slap to his face. She glared at him, forcing words out of her gritted teeth. “Take your filthy paws off of me.”

“You’ve clearly been poisoned, and quite heavily. If this goes untreated, all of your

internal organs will rot." Cloudhawk finally understood why the Bloodsoaked Queen was so weak. A resigned yet curious look appeared in his eyes. "But it doesn't look like you were bitten by an animal. What happened?"

The Bloodsoaked Queen growled out, "None of your business. Fuck off!"

"Why are you such a pain to work with!" Cloudhawk was starting to grow pissed off as well. "I saved you. TWICE. Not only are you being an ingrate, you are acting like an asshole. Oh, right… you also tried to kill me! For fuck's sake, if it wasn't because you know of the world beyond the wastelands, do you really think I'd be working so fucking hard to save you?"

The Queen trembled with rage. "You…"

"Just shut up! You won't be able to hang on for much longer. If you don't get treatment, you'll die." Cloudhawk shook his head. "I swear to you, if you die in my place, I'll have no choice but to strip you naked, eviscerate you, then stuff you like a doll. Given how pretty you are, you'll make a lovely souvenir. We'll stick you right in front of the outpost for everyone to see."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't dare? Why the hell wouldn't I?" The Queen was noticeably growing weaker and weaker, and so Cloudhawk was becoming more and more daring. No matter what, he wouldn't let this woman die here. He wanted, needed, to learn a way out of the wastelands. "If you don't want to die, then please work with me, alright?"

The Bloodsoaked Queen let out a few rattling coughs, a few flecks of blood flying out of her mouth. *Oh, shit. This is bad. She's not gonna actually die here, is she?*

The Queen shut her eyes. After taking a few deep breaths, she opened her eyes again. No emotions could be seen in her gaze, and she now looked as calm and collected as ever. She said in a cold, calm voice, "Three days ago, I was hunting after the demon. I found the place he was hiding, but accidentally revealed myself and ended up being attacked by his minions. I wiped them all out, but I paid a price… and I was also struck by a poison dart." As she spoke, she handed over the short dart she had been clenching this entire time.

"This was the thing you were using to threaten me earlier, right?" Cloudhawk accepted the poison dart. It was slick, barbed, and extremely sharp; clearly, this was a high-

quality weapon. It was also smeared with something that was dark-green in color, and a few flakes of dried blood could be seen on its surface. No ordinary wastelander would ever have access to such a weapon. “Fuck. That was close!” The Queen really was a vicious schemer. If she had so much as nicked him, he probably would be a goner by now!

“With so many of his minions killed, the demon naturally found out that I was here and hunting for him. However, he doesn’t know much about me, nor does he know if there are other demonhunters working by my side. Given how slippery and crafty demons are, he won’t reveal himself unless absolutely necessary. That’s why he’s chosen to watch from the shadows while sending out others to test me.”

The Bloodsoaked Queen’s voice turned deep and dark. “The ‘sweeper leader’ you saw earlier today was one of his minions. Their real target wasn’t the outpost; it was me.”

Although he had guessed at this long ago, he still felt shocked upon hearing his suspicions confirmed. “No wonder. You clearly were able to defeat him with ease, but you insisted on killing him in the most dramatic fashion possible.” Cloudhawk suddenly understood everything. “You were putting on a false front! It was so obvious, even I could tell. Do you really think you fooled him?”

The Queen stuttered slightly. She had felt certain that she had put on a flawless performance, revealing no weaknesses at all. How was it that the kid was able to see through everything? But she had most likely indeed been able to deceive her foe. Otherwise, there was no way things would’ve ended that easily!

“You still haven’t told me what a ‘demon’ is.”

“Demons are cruel, savage, vicious, venomous creatures. They are the source of all sin, the cause of all calamities, and they are the enemies of mankind. As a demonhunter blessed by the grace of the gods, my principal responsibility is to hunt down demons. Honorless, faithless heathens like you could never understand.”

The Bloodsoaked Queen slowly closed her eyes as she continued to speak. “I have no idea how strong that demon was. I don’t even know if the play I put on today was able to fool him. You’ve saved me twice, so I’ll give you fair warning – leave this place immediately!”

Cloudhawk was stunned. “What?”

“Blackflag Outpost is currently the most dangerous place in the wastelands. Its very existence is balanced on a steel wire, and the slightest wind could blow it off. The demon holds tremendous power in these wastelands. For him, destroying Blackflag Outpost is a very easy task. It might happen tomorrow. It might happen right now.” The Bloodsoaked Queen opened her dark, jewel-like eyes again, a steady look in her gaze. “If you leave right now, you might be able to escape. Flee, as fast as you can.”

Cloudhawk still had no idea what a ‘demon’ was. Still, there was no reason for this female demonhunter to lie to him. The fact remained that she had been heavily injured by the minions of this ‘demon’, and she hadn’t even been able to face it in person. This meant that there was an enormous gap in power between this young demonhunter and the ‘demon’ she spoke of.

Blackflag Outpost might truly be in danger!

Cloudhawk swallowed, hard. “Fuck. I can feel a chill going down my spine. But… why haven’t you fled yourself? Given how badly hurt you are, there’s no way you can win!”

“Flee?” The Bloodsoaked Queen forced herself to sit up, leaning against the headboard of the bed. She was extremely weak, but she still possessed an aura of forlorn beauty. Her eyes were filled with ardent faith and firm resolution, as well a look of absolute disdain for the ignorant child before her.

“How can a wastelander ant possibly understand the faith and resolve of a demonhunter?”

“Alright, alright! I get it already. I’m an ant, a bug. You are a noble demonhunter, a royal queen. Everyone gets it already. Do you really have to repeat this crap over and over?” Cloudhawk was getting rather impatient. “No matter what, the first thing we have to do is to treat your wounds. There’s a guy outside named ‘Mantis’. You should’ve heard of him before, right? He loves to spend his time studying venomous insects and various poisons. I’m sure he’d be able to help treat you. How about I call him over and have him treat you in secret?”

“Unacceptable!” The Bloodsoaked Queen replied coldly, “No one in the wastelands can be trusted. You can’t let anyone see me in the state I’m in!”

This woman is crazy stubborn. What the hell am I supposed to do? Judging from the condition she was in, the poison shouldn’t be too dangerous; otherwise, there was no

way she could've lasted for so long. Poisons meant to be pre-applied to weapons were generally formulated to be long-lasting rather than potent. There were some types of poison that could almost instantly kill a person, but they were only potent for very brief periods of time. When a battle suddenly erupted, there was often no time to properly apply poison to your weapons.

Cloudhawk played with the dart for a few moments when suddenly, something clicked. "I have an idea!"

"What is your id-…" Halfway through her words, the Queen fell silent. Her eyes bulged out as something completely unexpected happened. Cloudhawk suddenly stabbed himself in the arm with the poison dart, leaving behind a bloody wound on it. The Queen stared at him, completely dumbfounded. "W-what are you…"

"Just wait here!" Cloudhawk was in such pain that sweat was pouring down his head, but he still squeezed out a smile. He seemed quite proud of this 'genius' idea of his. "I'll be back shortly and I'll save you!"

As soon as he finished talking, he pushed the door open and left.

"Help! HELP! I've been poisoned! Where's Mantis? WHERE'S MANTIS?! I need him to save me!"

The Queen just stared blankly as he charged out, not sure if she should laugh or cry. What the hell was wrong with the kid?

Chapter 33
Treatment

What gave Cloudhawk the courage to do such a thing? Sheer, absolute ignorance!

As Cloudhawk saw it, if the Queen was able to survive multiple days without dying, the poison couldn't be all that powerful, right? He was a recovery metahuman. How could he possibly lose to a woman in this area?

But soon, Cloudhawk realized that he was wrong. Completely, breathtakingly wrong! Less than five minutes after the poison dart nicked his skin, he realized that he had completely lost all feeling in his entire arm. Large patches of skin had already begun to turn purplish-black. Cloudhawk was scared out of his wits, and he frantically half-ran, half-stumbled straight towards Mantis' workshop!

Mantis was in the middle of inspecting a new specimen. He adjusted his spectacles, cold light reflecting off the glass. "How exactly did you end up being poisoned by a twin-headed viper?"

Cloudhawk pretended to be completely confused as he vigorously shook his head. "I must've been ambushed by one of the sweepers during that fight. I didn't notice anything at first, but now my entire arm is numb!"

Mantis gave him a deep, long glance. "Really?"

"Why are you staring at me like that?!" The look was making Cloudhawk's hair stand on end. "Are you gonna save me or not?"

Without saying another word, Mantis went to work. He began to mix together a number of strange medicinal fluids, producing two little jars of fluid which he handed over to Cloudhawk. "The first should be smeared over the wound itself, ensuring that it doesn't fester. The second should be taken orally to flush the poison from your body. You'll recover in one day."

……

The Queen's face was ashen, and she lay curled on the bed. Her crow-black hair was plastered to her face by her sweat, and her brows were knitted in pain. This dominating woman, who had been able to slay a three-meter tall maneater with a single slap, was now completely powerless. In fact, she looked rather sad and pitiable. When Cloudhawk pushed open the door and ran inside, she didn't react at all.

Had she passed out again? Even if she hadn't, she was clearly in bad shape! *You can't die. Even if you do die, you can't die here. I haven't asked you any of the questions I want to ask yet!*

Cloudhawk began to clumsily strip off her outer garments. Just as his hands touched her skin, her eyelashes fluttered slightly. A freezing look was in her eyes as she glared at him. She was using her gaze to warn him that he was making a dangerous, dangerous decision.

When Cloudhawk saw the look in her eyes, he felt his heart clench in fear. Even though she was extremely weak, her glare still contained a mesmerizing, terrifying quality to it.

She was an powerless yet peerless beauty. She was also an indomitable, fearless warrior. These two things should've been completely contradictory, but they had somehow been joined together in her. What type of faith could produce someone like her?

"I thought you passed out." Cloudhawk awkwardly pulled his hands back, then showed off the two bottles he was holding. "I have the antidote here. Since you haven't passed out, you can go ahead and treat yourself."

This woman was not only powerful, she also had a terrible temper. Cloudhawk was terrified that she might slap him into mincemeat, and so he didn't dare to touch her. Instead, he obediently handed over the two bottles to her.

The Queen felt both numb and powerless. She no longer had the strength to move at all. She tried to rise, only to discover that she was unable to do so. After numerous attempts, she finally gave up.

Cloudhawk was puzzled. "What's wrong?"

The Queen gave Cloudhawk a weighing look. Although he was a contemptible wastelander, he looked rather handsome and there didn't seem to be any ulterior

motives visible in his eyes. “You do it.” She had been born into a noble clan, was a proud hunter of demons, and had an innate sense of superiority over the wastelanders. As a result, she spoke in a very imperious manner, almost as though she was ordering a servant to do something.

Didn’t really matter though. Cloudhawk didn’t mind her attitude. He blinked a few times, then mumbled softly, “I can help you if you want, but if I accidentally see something I shouldn’t see or touch something I shouldn’t touch… I’m worried that you’ll gouge my eyes out or chop my hands off. I reaaaally don’t want to do this.”

His concerns weren’t completely unfounded. Given the Queen’s personality, she was entirely capable of doing such things.

The Queen gave him a hard glare. If looks could kill, Cloudhawk would’ve died a hundred times over. “Hmph. I’m not as fussy as you think. I won’t do anything to you as long as you don’t try anything funny.”

“Fine, then.” Cloudhawk walked over rather reluctantly. He first helped her strip off her outer garments, revealing the tight, form-fitting black clothes underneath. This was a suit of armor that had been created from some sort of incredibly durable leather. The workmanship was exquisite and meticulous; there was no way something like this could’ve been made in the wastelands.

“I, uh, have to take off this thing as well.”

“Shut up and do it!”

The Queen’s words were tough and disdainful, but her face was turning slightly flushed. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see anything further. This actually made Cloudhawk feel even more uneasy; she wouldn’t kill him afterwards to silence him, would she? Still, there was nothing else he could do.

Cloudhawk carefully unfastened her leather armor, but it was impossible for him to avoid all contact with her when he did this. Thanks to his control metapowers, Cloudhawk could clearly sense that her entire body would turn tense whenever he touched her. Clearly, this woman wasn’t as open-minded about being touched by a man as she had claimed.

Most of the leather armor had been removed, leaving behind a black undergarment that covered her upper chest. The rest of her body was now completely bare.

Cloudhawk had never touched a woman before today, much less seen such a flawless form. Every inch of her body seemed to have been perfectly sculpted and molded. As for the black chest bindings, they were extremely tight but unable to completely disguise her curves.

"Watch your eyes!" The Queen's own eyes remained shut as she issued this warning. Cloudhawk quickly came back to his senses and hurriedly began to treat her wounds. Her injuries were even more severe than he had imagined; her side-belly had almost turned completely black by now. Cloudhawk couldn't even imagine what sort of method she had used to contain the damage to this region, preventing it from spreading even further.

Cloudhawk had learned a few things from Mantis, and as a result his movements were very clean and quick. He first used a scalpel to cut off the festering flesh around the wounds, letting the clotted blood flow out. He then poured some of the medicinal fluids over her wounds. The Queen furrowed her brows in pain, perhaps because the fluid stung, but didn't say a thing.

She really was a tough woman. Cloudhawk himself was about to jump up and down from the pain he felt when smearing the medicine over her wounds.

"You won't be able to recover from these wounds in just one or two days." Cloudhawk bandaged her wounds with cloth, then placed the remainder of the medicine to one side. "Thankfully, I'm a recovery metahuman and as such can heal quickly. I didn't need to use too much medicine for myself. All the rest is for you to use."

The Bloodsoaked Queen had felt utterly humiliated by this entire process, but she had been out of options. She tightly clenched her fists. Thankfully, the kid hadn't tried to cop a feel in the process; otherwise, she really would've chopped him until he turned into mincemeat. As for the medicine, it really did seem to be effective; her pain was already beginning to subside, and she immediately felt a sense of relief.

"I know Mantis' workshop like the back of my hand, and I memorized all the ingredients he used to create the antidote. If this isn't enough, I'll go back and steal some more for you." Cloudhawk helped the Queen put on her garments once more. "In short, don't worry. You'll recover from this."

The Queen glanced at him rather unhappily. "Stop chattering!"

Man, she really is tough to deal with. Cloudhawk shook his head, then turned to leave. The Bloodsoaked Queen instantly felt puzzled. “Where are you going?”

Cloudhawk said helplessly, “Your Royal Highness, if I wanted to do something bad to you I wouldn’t have wasted all this time helping you. Can you cut it with all your suspicions? Just rest up. I’ll be back soon!”

“YOU!” The Bloodsoaked Queen’s eyes narrowed into slits. How dare this wastelander act like this towards her? This was preposterously unacceptable!

Roughly fifteen minutes later, Cloudhawk returned with a large pile of items in his arms. He had a few bottles of clean water, a few chunks of meat jerky, some medicine for puncture wounds, some freshly washed and cleaned bandages, and various other instruments needed to treat injuries.

Cloudhawk picked up one of the chunks of jerky, chewing and swallowing while mumbling from the corner of his mouth, “You were hurt pretty badly. I figured you’d need some time to recover, so I grabbed some things we’ll need.” Cloudhawk finished off the chunk of meat in just a few moments… and right at this moment, a gurgling sound could be heard.

The sound was very soft, but it was extremely noticeable given how silent the room was. The sound had come from the Queen’s belly. She had been lying there like a jade statue, her eyes closed as she rested… but now, her beautiful face almost instantly turned beet-red. The redness stretched all the way down her neck and up her ears, making her look rather adorable.

Awkward. Really, really awkward. She had actually embarrassed herself in front of this heathen bastard. *Oh gods, I want to find a hole to hide in.*

Cloudhawk continued to chew on his food as he mumbled, “You hungry too, eh?”

She let out a hard snort, not saying a word. *No shit! Are you trying to piss me off on purpose?* If he knew she was hungry, why couldn’t he just hand her some food? Was he waiting for her to ask? The Queen was a very prideful person; she would rather starve to death than lower her head and ask a heathen wastelander for food!

“Wait a sec.” Cloudhawk poured some water into a bowl, then tore off a few strips of jerky and placed it into the bowl along with some bread. Moments later, he went to his doorway and lit a chunk of wood on fire, holding the bowl over it to warm it up. Only

then did he bring the 'soup' back to the Queen. "Your body is pretty weak right now. This will help you get better faster."

The Queen stared blankly at the warm bread-jerky soup, a few mixed emotions flickering through her clear, limpid eyes.

"I know you are used to better treatment, but this is the best food I have on me. In fact, I actually saved it up over the past few days as a special treat for myself. Just bear with it for now, alright? Need me to feed you?"

"No need." The Queen had a rather complex look on her face as she took the crude, battered bowl into her hands. She took a small sip in a very delicate manner, allowing small chunks of rat jerky and hard bread to flow into her stomach along with the hot water. It really didn't taste that good, but she could feel some strength returning to her.

Cloudhawk turned away as she ate, busying himself with other tasks. But right at this moment, a whisper-soft voice came from right behind him. "Thank you…"

Cloudhawk was stunned. Was he hearing things? He turned around, a 'confused' look on his face. "What's that? You say something?"

"Are you deaf? Fuck off!" The Bloodsoaked Queen's glare was so sharp, he felt as though it could chop him up into three parts.

"D-don't get mad. I just never imagined that a savage woman like you would ever say 'thank you' to anyone. I wasn't trying to make fun of you, honest!" Cloudhawk couldn't help but let out two chortles. By now, he was certain that she was no longer as guarded against him as she had been. "The 'Bloodsoaked Queen'…that sounds like a nickname. You should have a real name, right? Can you tell me?"

The Queen finished the rest of the 'soup'. "I'm tired."

"Oh. I'm tired too, actually, but there's only one bed. I guess we'll just have to squeeze together." Cloudhawk had meant it as a joke, and the results were entirely predictable; the Queen's eyes glared murder at him. He hurriedly said, "But you know, it's too tight a fit. I'll sleep on the ground."

That's more like it! The Queen said not a word of thanks as she lay back down on the bed.

She didn't even answer any of my questions! Ah, forget it. No rush. Cloudhawk blew out the lamp, made himself a bed of straw, then covered himself with the wolf pelt which Slyfox had brought him.

"My name is Cloudhawk."

The Queen still didn't respond.

Man, she sure is unfriendly. I guess she really doesn't like wastelanders. Cloudhawk didn't say anything further. To be honest, none of this really mattered. The wolf pelt stank terribly, but it was also very warm. It had been two days and two nights since he had last rested, and he quickly drifted off into the sweet land of slumber.

Chapter 34
The Outside World

What were the wastelands like?

They were filled with rot, filth, violence, barbarianism, and corruption! As for the wastelands, they served as the claws of the demons. They were born with sin in their blood, and were both hideous and revolting. This was why they had been banned from the Elysiums.

The Bloodsoaked Queen was an incredibly devout and pious believer. She would never view wastelanders as humans, and it was not forbidden for elysians to show wastelanders any pity or mercy. They would be profaning the almighty gods if they did. But… this Cloudhawk seemed to be different.

Over the course of the next two days, the Bloodsoaked Queen gradually discovered that this wastelander youth didn't have too many bad habits. After poisoning himself with the dart in order to save her, he gave her the majority of what little food he had each day. He attentively helped her treat her injuries. When faced with her arrogance and her powerlessness, he didn't put on a show of being reluctantly tolerant of her either.

He truly was an extremely rare breed of wastelander.

By now, the Bloodsoaked Queen's attitude towards him had improved immensely. She was now strong enough to kill him with ease if she so chose. Should she? Should she get rid of the kid? *Ah, forget it.* The kid had unique sensory abilities; he might be able to help serve as an early-alert system for her. If she let him stay alive, he might be of use to her in her mission. Fighting against that demon was more important than anything else.

The Bloodsoaked Queen's desire to kill him gradually faded, allowing Cloudhawk to finally relax. Although she seemed cruel and savage, she was actually a very pure and sensitive person. She covered herself with a hard spiked shell of ice, but that was all for the sake of protecting herself in these cannibalistic wastelands. If she didn't force herself to be as tough as the wastelanders, how could she possibly hold them down?

In addition, the Bloodsoaked Queen was a woman of many mysteries! She had come to the wastelands from a faraway land, all for the sake of hunting down one of those so-called 'demons'. This couldn't be simply due to her calling as a demonhunter, right? The hatred she had accidentally revealed the last time he had talked to her about it was proof that this was a mission of revenge. The Bloodsoaked Queen was here as an avenger… but Cloudhawk didn't dare ask her too much about herself.

When Cloudhawk look at this tough, pious warrior woman, he felt as though he could see the glory, the sincerity, the steadfastness, and the virtuousness of the elysians. They were worlds apart from the brutish, twisted, brutal, and berserk wastelanders. This only made Cloudhawk long to visit the elysian lands even more.

But of course, the Bloodsoaked Queen wasn't exactly easy to befriend. She was filled with a sense of superiority which Cloudhawk did not understand, and she seemed to feel as though living for a few days with a wastelander like Cloudhawk was the greatest stain and blot on her honor which she had ever experienced. It was as though the noble daughter of an empress had somehow been forced to live in a beggar's shack and share his food for days on end… and the fact that the beggar had saved her life was the worst part of it!

If it wasn't for the fact that she wanted to recover as quickly as possible in order to fight her mortal foe, there was no way she would've accepted such humiliation!

But the Bloodsoaked Queen's wariness continued to slowly lessen by the day, while Cloudhawk slowly grew more and more daring. Nagging, whining, pleading… he used every option at his disposal to try and find out more about the outside world. He really was like a mosquito that buzzed around her all day long. How could the Bloodsoaked Queen not find him irritating?

Still, compared to the other wastelanders the kid had his own good traits, such as his stubbornness and his tenacity. Although he was laughably foolish and ignorant, he really was an exceptional person for a wastelander. She had never before encountered any wastelander who dreamed of leaving the wastelands.

As a result, every so often she would answer one of his questions. Based on the scant bits of information she provided, Cloudhawk slowly began to gain a brand new understanding of the outside world.

Roughly 95% of the world was covered by the wastelands… but there really were

blessed lands. Only, they were all very, very far away, with the nearest one still being around 2000 kilometers away.

The vast majority of wastelands vehicles rarely travelled more than 150 kilometers in any direction. You'd run out of supplies and run out of fuel, and there would be no information about the area you were in. You'd be swarmed by beasts, robbed by men, choked by sand, or perhaps fall into one of those terrifying regions where space and time were both twisted. There were countless unknown variables in any long-distance journey, and thus not even the most experienced of demonhunters would dare claim that they could definitely traverse the vast wastelands by themselves.

A weak wastelander who spent all his days dreaming about leaving the wastelands was nothing more than a fool! The Bloodsoaked Queen didn't even try to disguise her disdain for him, often throwing a few mocking words his way as she pointed out how foolish and unrealistic his dreams were. Even assuming this weak wastelander youth really was somehow able to survive his trip into elysian lands, did he really think they would let him in? Him, a lowborn heathen?

But Cloudhawk didn't let himself be discouraged by her words. In fact, he only grew even more excited. The elysian lands might be very far away, but they weren't unreachable. Having a goal to work for was better than just wandering about, completely lost! Even though he knew his chances were slim, he'd still go fight for them. As for whether or not the elysians would accept him into Elysium? He didn't care about that at all.

The kid's hopeless! The Bloodsoaked Queen eventually got bored of mocking him.

What was the relationship between the 'gods' and the 'demons'? Between the 'wastelands' and the 'elysian lands'? Cloudhawk still didn't have a clear answer to this question, but he was slowly beginning to understand.

The elysian lands were paradise, blessed with prosperity and filled with piety and faith. The gods had bestowed endless fertility onto the elysian lands, gracing them with countless crops which permitted all the elysians to eat to their hearts' content. The gods had blessed the elysian lands with special livestock that grew very rapidly, allowing all elysians to be able to drink the most delicious of cow's milk. As for the elysian children, the gods had blessed them with inconceivable power and wisdom.

The gods had brought order and peace, casting all calamities, illnesses, and pains away

from their elysians. They even bestowed mighty artifacts and special powers upon their demonhunters, then established vast cities and marvelous temples through which they wrought the most inconceivable of miracles. Every single person living in elysian lands was filled with nothing but the most absolute of respect towards the gods.

As for the demons?

As their names suggested, they were freaks and abominations that were completely antithetical to the gods. They were incredibly brutal and savage, filled with naked ambition and diabolical cunning. On numerous occasions, they had very nearly caused the destruction of the human race. It was only thanks to the guidance and the assistance of the gods that humanity had defeated the demons. Thanks to the many Elysiums which the gods had established, tens of millions of humans were able to live in peace and prosperity.

The rest of the world, however, was consumed by the wastes. The wastelands had previously been dominated by the demons, and the ancestors of the wastelanders had supposedly been the servants of the demons. This was why wastelanders were usually hideous and brutal, and why they were not accepted into elysian lands!

But that chaotic era of war had ended long ago, with the demons having all but vanished without a trace. The gods had unified the world, making it orderly and peaceful. Still, there were still a few demons hiding in the various corners of the world who foolishly sought to cause trouble, fomenting one vile scheme after another. The league of demonhunters had been established to put an end to their wicked sins.

Demonhunters were the most elite warriors of the entire human race. They were all sincere, devout warriors of the gods who had been bestowed with special powers… and as the title implied, their divine mission was to hunt demons. Each time the Bloodsoaked Queen mentioned the demonhunters, a look of indisguisable pride appeared within her eyes.

She had been born into an entire clan of demonhunters, and she was the youngest and most talented demonhunter of her generation! Her father, her grandfather, her uncles… all of them were glorious demonhunters!

……

Cloudhawk shook the bottle of medicine, then shrugged his shoulders helplessly. “We’re out of medicine again. I’ll have to steal a bit more from Mantis’ workshop.”

By now, the Bloodsoaked Queen had recovered approximately thirty to forty percent of her power. She no longer needed to fear anyone in the outpost… but of course, she wasn’t anywhere near strong enough to hunt demons yet.

The Bloodsoaked Queen had yet to personally battle against any demon. When demonhunters went hunting, they generally moved in packs. The Bloodsoaked Queen had travelled all by herself to this place, so deep within the wastelands. Although she was undoubtedly brave, she was also undoubtedly rash.

As for her injuries, they would take at least two weeks to heal! Her hope was that the enemy would give her at least that period of time to recover.

The Bloodsoaked Queen rose to her feet, preparing to leave.

“Where are you going? You are still injured. You can’t leave yet!” Cloudhawk hurriedly moved to stop her. He still didn’t have the answers to his questions yet; if he let this opportunity slip away, he would probably never have another opportunity again.

“There’s no need for me to continue hiding in this shabby room any further.” The Bloodsoaked Queen had already made up her mind. “I admit that you were of assistance to me. The warriors of the gods do not forget those who provided them succor! I can agree to any one request of yours, so long as it isn’t an excessive one. Speak!”

Cloudhawk was instantly stunned. The Bloodsoaked Queen was promising to help him out with a request? What incredible luck! If Cloudhawk so chose, he would consign any person in the outpost to death; who could possibly be a match for this freak in front of him? But of course, Cloudhawk would never waste an opportunity like this on something so pointless.

“I want to leave the wastelands!”

“Impossible!”

The Bloodsoaked Queen was quite displeased. She had already told him numerous times that this was impossible, and yet the kid continued to persist.

Cloudhawk frowned, a frustrated look on his face. He thought the question over, then came to a decision. “Then I want to learn demonhunter techniques. Can you teach them to me?”

The Bloodsoaked Queen didn’t understand. “Why would you want to learn that?”

“I just do!” Cloudhawk said firmly, “Maybe I can become a demonhunter as well!”

The Queen couldn’t help but let out a laugh. They had spent several days living together, but this was the first time Cloudhawk had witnessed her smiling, and it truly stunned him. It was as though an iceberg that had remained frozen for ten millennia had suddenly thawed and melted, revealing the dazzling, lively, and beautiful soul hidden underneath it. For a moment, he was dazed by it.

“You obstinate, daydreaming fool!” The Queen’s face quickly hardened once more. She said in her customary, cold voice, “I can teach you, yes… but I have to warn you right now that if you don’t have the necessary talent or the blessings of the gods, these techniques will be completely useless to you, even if by some miracle you actually manage to master them.”

Cloudhawk revealed a look of absolute ecstasy. He really hadn’t expected her to agree… but she really had! “I don’t care! I just want the chance to learn it!”

“If you truly are going to be so stubborn as to try and learn demonhunter techniques, then I’ll teach you. However, I’ll only teach you for a day.” The Bloodsoaked Queen put her silver mask back on her face, and her voice became hoarse and grating once more. “Come find me when you are ready.”

After speaking, she departed from the room. Cloudhawk just stood there dumbly, staring as her willowy form departed.

Chapter 35
The Conviction of the Weak

Nightfall. Training had concluded for the day, and the mercenaries had split off into small groups in search of entertainment.

Cloudhawk, however, was stealthily creeping towards Mantis' workshop. He wanted to seize advantage of this period of time, when there was no one around, to rifle through Mantis' stash and pilfer a few jars of medicine. He remembered how Mantis had mixed the various restoratives and medicinal fluids, and he was sure he could do the same. *Freaking Mantis. He keeps on ordering me around all the time. He can just consider this stuff my salary!*

Cloudhawk wasn't a saint who had come to save the masses, nor was he a gentleman who followed a code of chivalry. Blackflag Outpost was about to face a powerful enemy! This was what Cloudhawk was really concerned about. The stronger the Queen was, the safer the outpost would be… and the safer the outpost would be, the safer Cloudhawk would be. Besides, befriending the Queen was a form of investment that might pay off in the future. He might be able to learn a few things from her.

All done! Cloudhawk smugly cradled the two jars of medicine and prepared to leave. Right as he turned, he suddenly saw a tall, skinny figure standing directly behind him. The man stood there like a wraith, making no sound at all and covered in the darkness of dusky night. He had a silent, sinister aura about him, but no expressions could be seen on his face. His spectacles, however, gleamed with cold light.

Cloudhawk nearly jumped into the air with fright. "Are you a freaking ghost?!" When had this guy appeared? Why hadn't Cloudhawk noticed anything at all?

Mantis turned his gaze to the jars of medicine Cloudhawk was holding. Cloudhawk had been caught red-handed, and there was no place for him to hide. All he could do was come up with a frantic, far-fetched excuse: "I feel like I'm still not completely healed yet, so I thought I'd grab a bit more medicine. Don't be so stingy, alright?"

Mantis' face remained blank and impassive, like an ever-frozen piece of ice. There was no way to tell whether he was angry or not.

Swoosh! Mantis took a single step forwards, and as he did an ice-cold scalpel suddenly flew out from between his fingers. Cloudhawk's eyes widened. *Holy shit. It's just some medicine! Are you seriously gonna kill me over it?*

Mantis stalked forwards, as agile and as silent as a cat, his movements ghostly and unfathomable. The icy scalpel kissed Cloudhawk's ears as it flew past his head… and then Mantis walked straight past Cloudhawk, not even glancing at the boy as he returned to his usual work station. Mantis put on his gloves, picked up his tools, lit a lamp, then began to carry out his normal work with his usual unflappability.

Cloudhawk's clothes were completely matted with cold sweat. For those few seconds, he felt as though he had been facing a viper, as though he had attracted the attention of a death god. After he recovered from his fear, a surge of anger filled him. "What the hell, man? Are you trying to scare me to death?"

All three of the captains were bastards. Slyfox was insidiously vicious, Mad Dog was brutal and violent, while Mantis was completely unfathomable.

However, Mantis' next words caused Cloudhawk's rage to completely vanish. Cloudhawk stood there, a stupefied look on his face. Mantis' voice was calm and cool, as though he was discussing nothing more than the most minor of matters, but his words were like a bolt of thunder.

"Her world is not meant for you. We were born into the darkness of the wastes, and to the darkness and the wastes we shall forever belong."

"What are you talking about?"

Mantis split open the corpse before him with precision using his scalpel, then said in his customarily emotionless voice, "Just remember what I said. You can leave now."

The stunned Cloudhawk stood there for five full seconds. Mantis didn't turn to look at Cloudhawk, nor did he say anything further; he seemed completely absorbed in his research.

By now, Cloudhawk was fairly familiar with Mantis' temperament. The man valued his words like gold, but he never spoke nonsense. Did this mysterious, secretive man know something? Cloudhawk wanted to ask, but in the end he swallowed his words.

If Mantis didn't want to talk, there was no way Cloudhawk could pry any words out of

him. Besides, this really didn't matter right now. The most important thing for the moment was to go find the Queen. He had no time to waste here, and so he immediately hugged the jars of medicine to him as he fled from Mantis' workshop.

……

There was a large apartment compound at the very center of Blackflag Outpost. Not only was this structure large, it was also extremely sturdy; in the wastelands, it could absolutely be considered a luxurious mansion.

Cloudhawk wanted to learn more about the world outside the wastelands, as well as the skills and techniques from that world. He grew more and more excited just thinking about it. He rubbed the stone hanging around his neck. Perhaps if he became a demonhunter, he would learn how to unleash the true power of this stone. This was why he insisted on learning demonhunter techniques from the Bloodsoaked Queen. Although he didn't know where the stone came from, he felt certain that it was extraordinary.

But just as Cloudhawk was about to enter the Bloodsoaked Queen's private residence… swish! A feathered arrow suddenly flew past Cloudhawk's nose and plunged into the boulder right next to him. A quarter of the arrow had been buried into the stone, and the feather was quivering. If it had been just a few centimeters to the right, it would've blown a hole straight through Cloudhawk's head.

"This place is off limits for you. Fuck off!"

An enormous man walked over, a number of elite guards by his side. Cloudhawk had seen this man before and recognized him; he was the (now only) captain of the elite guards, Grizzly! He was an elite expert who was on par with the three captains of the Tartarus mercenaries. Cloudhawk wouldn't be able to beat any of the elite guards, much less Grizzly himself.

"Why are you stopping me?" Cloudhawk stared straight at Grizzly, neither obsequious nor overbearing in his manner. "The Bloodsoaked Queen has summoned me!"

"HAH!"

"Go piss in a pool and take a good look at yourself."

"Do you really think the Queen would summon a brat like you?"

The elite guards began to mock and jeer at him.

“So a rookie of the Tartarus mercenaries has come to my turf to cause trouble, eh?” Grizzly walked towards Cloudhawk, and it was like a mountain moving towards him. He stared at the brat before him, his bestial, hungry eyes glowing with anger. “Not even Slyfox would dare to cause trouble here. You need to fuck off before I start to get seriously pissed.”

Cloudhawk wasn’t frightened by Grizzly’s intimidating words at all. He glared right back at the mountain-sized man.

“You little shit.” Grizzly was infuriated by this. Just as he was about to strike, a hoarse voice suddenly rang out from inside the residence. “Let him in!” The voice sounded like the hissing of a hundred serpents, and it was absolutely hair-raising.

Grizzly came to a halt, a dazed look on his face. “My Queen…”

The Bloodsoaked Queen’s hoarse voice rang out a second time. “Do you have any objections?”

“N-none at all!” Grizzly hurriedly stepped backwards in a respectful manner. He was a legendary warrior of Blackflag Outpost, the first captain of the elite guards… yet he didn’t even dare to breathe too loudly in the Queen’s presence!

Cloudhawk truly had to admire the Queen for this. There was no way someone like Grizzly could be easily tamed. Take Slyfox or Mad Dog as examples; although they feared the Bloodsoaked Queen’s power, there was no way they would truly be willing to whole-heartedly submit to her!

Grizzly watched as Cloudhawk sauntered straight into the Queen’s private residence, a flicker of jealousy deep within his eyes. He had followed the Queen for nearly a year, but had never had a chance to enter her private residence. How had this piece of refuse which the Tartarus mercenaries had picked up from who-knows-where managed to worm his way into the Queen’s good graces? How? HOW?!

Several of the elite guards began to let out unhappy mutters.

“The Queen went missing for a few days. What’s going on with her?”

“Not even our boss Grizzly has been permitted to enter her private residence. Why the

hell was the kid allowed inside?"

Grizzly barked, "Shut it!" The guards exchanged a few glances, all of them falling silent.

Why was the Bloodsoaked Queen's rule over Blackflag Outpost such a stable one? Her overwhelming power was one reason, but another very important reason was that she had the unswerving support of the elite guards.

Grizzly was the leader of the elite guards. Why was it that he was so loyal to the Queen? This might be a mystery to others, but everyone in the elite guards knew the true reason. Alas, the Bloodsoaked Queen was cruel and proud; she viewed all wastelanders as ants for the crushing or wheat for the scything. She never viewed them as equals! All of the brothers of the elite guards felt bad for Grizzly; they felt it wasn't worth it.

A complex look was in Grizzly's eyes. When the Bloodsoaked Queen had first come to Blackflag Outpost, Grizzly had, completely by accident and happenstance, managed to see her true face. It could be said that he was the very first person in the entire outpost to see her true visage. Although he had only caught a glimpse, her beauty was something out of this world and nothing which the wastelands could produce… and it was burned into his mind like a searing hot iron.

Grizzly had no idea where the Bloodsoaked Queen came from. He didn't know what she had experienced or what her goal was. He knew nothing about her at all… and none of that mattered. Ever since he had seen her true face, Grizzly had felt as though he had found a pure, sacred oasis within the dark brutality of the world.

This wasn't just the love and adoration which the weak felt towards the strong; it was a type of faith, a type of conviction which every single person had.

Grizzly believed that he had discovered the most beautiful thing in the world. She was the most flawless of jewels, the flame of faith which lit the darkness around him. From that day forth, he decided to completely dedicate everything he had to protecting her. He might be a crude, despicable man who wasn't worthy of holding this divine treasure in his hands, but he absolutely would not allow anything or anyone else to violate it. Not even the slightest stain was acceptable!

"That kid…"

Grizzy's large, iron-hard fists couldn't help but clench. He felt nauseous, as though he

had just been forced to swallow a few dozen maggots! That dirty, low-down scavenger… how the hell had he found himself in the Queen's favor? Why the hell was he being allowed into the Queen's residence?

"Grizzly, what say I grab a few of our brothers and…" One of the elite guards scanned the area, then carefully made a chopping gesture with his hand.

Grizzly hesitated a moment. "Be careful of the Tartarus mercenary. Slyfox is extremely protective of his people."

The elite guard chuckled. "Don't worry, boss. We'll kill him nice and clean. No one will suspect us at all."

Grizzly couldn't help but think of Wulf. If Wulf hadn't died, the elite squad wouldn't need to fear the Tartarus mercenaries at all. He had already lost his most loyal friend; there was no way he could allow the most sacred being in his world to be befouled and besmirched by a rat. She was the final thing keeping him alive in the dark world of the wastelands!

That poor bastard, Cloudhawk, would have never imagined in his wildest dreams that Grizzly was so completely infatuated with the Bloodsoaked Queen… and he definitely would've never imagined that he had completely and thoroughly offended the entire elite guard squad of Blackflag Outpost because of this visit.

"I didn't expect to see you so soon."

The Bloodsoaked Queen's raven-black hair spilled across her shoulders as she walked towards him. She wasn't dressed in her usual cape or leather armor, just a long robe. Her snowy white neck was long and graceful, making her look like a proud, noble swan. The slight hint of cleavage she was showing was enough to drive almost any man mad with lust, and her long, slender pale legs were just barely visible. Her legs were like the most perfect work of art, and they added to her cold, regal dignity and beauty.

The only unpleasant thing about her was that hideous demon's mask.

Cloudhawk was still too young and ignorant to be dazzled by her beauty, and his attention was drawn to something else. The bathroom had an entire tub of clean water that seemed to have been used, as it was slowly disappearing into the pipes.

“Were you taking a bath, just now?” Cloudhawk’s eyes were so round they threatened to pop out of his head. “You used an entire tub’s worth of clean water, just to take a bath?”

Chapter 36
Accounts Settled

Water was the most precious commodity in the wastelands. Six years ago, this outpost was nothing more than a lifeless sea of sand. A group of excavators came to this place to dig through the ruins, only to find a large amount of underground water. Ever since then, Blackflag Outpost quickly began to grow in population before ultimately reaching its current size.

Water had created Blackflag Outpost. In the wastelands, those who controlled the water controlled the land.

The amount of water the Queen used to bathe in daily was enough to keep Cloudhawk alive for nearly a month. Such wasteful extravagance! But what really caused Cloudhawk's heart to clench was the fact that this clean, pure water was used just for bathing… because after the Queen finished her bath, she let it all go down the drain! To Cloudhawk, it wasn't water going down the pipes, it was blood, it was life itself!

Cloudhawk suddenly said something with the utmost of sincerity. "Your Majesty, would you be willing to give me all of your used bathwater?"

These words were meant sincerely and without any intention to offend at all. However, in the ears of the Bloodsoaked Queen these words were insulting or perhaps mocking. Her gaze turned ice-cold. "Say that one more time."

Cloudhawk had no idea how he had just enraged this fierce woman yet again, but he hurriedly changed the topic. He pulled out two jars of liquid from his pockets. "I brought you your medicine. There should be more than enough to treat your wounds here."

The Bloodsoaked Queen's gaze softened. She accepted them without a word of thanks, then turned and said coldly, "Follow me!"

The Queen's residence was simply enormous. It had a kitchen, a dining room, a bedroom, a bath, a washroom, and more. One floor was just a single giant room that was completely empty, with no objects within it save a prayer mat. This was where the

Queen spent much of her time training, meditating, and praying every day.

"Watch carefully." The Bloodsoaked Queen walked to the center of the giant training room, then slowly closed her eyes. She took a deep breath, then her entire body went into motion as she began to perform a set of extremely strange movements. The entire set of movements contained a total of thirty-six different stances that were linked together as fluidly as water. The movements seemed very simple, but in reality contained many profound mysteries to them.

The Queen moved extremely slowly. It took her a total of twenty minutes before she finally finished displaying the entire set of movements.

"Is that it?" Cloudhawk had been watching intently this entire time. Although he had a very strange feeling when watching, he couldn't pinpoint the exact cause of it. "Don't tell me that's the only thing you are gonna teach me. Are you messing with me?"

The Bloodsoaked Queen let out a cold snort. "Try them out for yourself before you say anything!"

Cloudhawk muttered disdainfully, "What's so hard about them?"

Guided by the Bloodsoaked Queen, he began to train in those movements as well. The strange thing was, as he performed the fourth movement he began to feel extremely tired. By the time he finished the fifth movement, his forehead was already covered in sweat. Every single inch of his body was aching by the sixth movement, as though his arms and legs were weighed down with thousand-pound weights.

Finally, by the seventh movement, Cloudhawk could no longer hold back.

"Ow, ow, OW! That freaking hurts!" Cloudhawk felt as though every single muscle in his body was being ripped apart, with all the energy having been drained out of his cells. He felt such agonizing pain that he just plopped down onto the ground, moaning as he writhed in pain. The feeling was simply indescribable!

Those movements looked very ordinary, and the Bloodsoaked Queen had managed to complete all of them without even working up a sweat. Cloudhawk, however, was in such pain by the seventh exhausting movement that he could no longer take it.

Cloudhawk moaned and groaned for quite a few minutes before slowly starting to recover. He felt certain that he had been tricked, and he glared at the Queen accusingly.

“Don’t tell me you demonhunters spend all your time practicing those movements! Are you all masochists?”

The Bloodsoaked Queen said placidly, “This is a basic training exercise meant to temper the body. Only by training in it for extended periods of time can you unlock the potential within your body. It will stimulate every aspect of your body, accelerating your growth in every way as it helps you become more powerful through giving you metapower enhancements. This is nothing more than a basic training exercise for demonhunters.”

Just a basic training exercise?

The Bloodsoaked Queen seemed to know exactly what Cloudhawk was thinking. “Although this is a basic technique, if you can fully complete all thirty-six movements and then gain some practical combat experience, you won’t be weaker than any other person in this entire outpost.”

Was this technique really that incredible? In the wastelands, metapowers were generally only activated over the course of multiple life-and-death situations. Cloudhawk had never thought that it would be possible to use a systemized training regime to increase his own strength and metapowers. It seemed as though demonhunters truly did have a few tricks up their sleeves. No wonder they were so strong!

Right now, Cloudhawk would rather die than try out the complete set of exercises a second time. Still, he was able to separate those thirty-six movements and train in them separately, which was less taxing. He went through all thirty-six movements, slowly but firmly engraving all of them deep into his mind. By now, he had fully memorized all of them. At the very least, he would have gained access to a technique which would help him grow stronger.

“Wait a second!” Cloudhawk was no fool. He wasn’t going to let her off the hook that easily! After having spent a considerable period of time silently memorizing the techniques, he suddenly seemed to wake up. He turned to the Queen and said in a loud, ‘righteous’ voice, “I might be a kid, but I’m not an idiot. Don’t even think you can fool me that easily. You know full well that this isn’t what I want to learn! I want to learn real techniques that will let me have the same special powers as you!”

This set of training exercises could only be used to train, temper, and strengthen the

body. What Cloudhawk really wanted to learn was how to use the same unfathomable, supernatural powers as the demonhunters had access to. Did the Bloodsoaked Queen really think she'd be able to fob him off with a set of basic training movements? Screw that!

"Hmph. You really don't know what's good for you." The Bloodsoaked Queen said coldly, "You haven't been blessed by the gods, and your mind has not been awoken to its psychic potential. Most importantly of all, you don't even have a divine relic. Do you really think that learning our techniques will give you access to our power? How laughable!"

"I insist on learning them!" Cloudhawk shook his head stubbornly. "And what the heck are 'divine relics'?"

What were divine relics? In truth, these 'divine relics' were magical artifacts which the gods had bestowed upon mankind. The principal qualification needed to become a demonhunter was the ability to control and wield divine relics.

There were many different relics with many different attributes. Some held sway over fire, wind, ice, earth, and other elemental powers. The vast majority of demonhunters could only become psychically resonant with one type of relic… and the relics were at the core of the true power which they were able to wield.

The Bloodsoaked Queen's gloves and the cross hanging around her neck were both heaven-sent relics which the gods had bestowed upon their demonhunters. It was thanks to these mighty artifacts that the Bloodsoaked Queen possessed such inconceivable, supernatural power!

But of course, having access to relics alone did not a demonhunter make. Demonhunters not only needed powerful relics, they also needed powerful reservoirs of psychic energy. Psychic energy, in and of itself, possessed no offensive power. However, once it was perfectly joined together with an attuned type of divine relic, it could create supernatural effects of unbelievable power.

The more psychic energy a demonhunter possessed, the more power the demonhunter would be able to unleash from his or her relics.

The Bloodsoaked Queen's sacred crossblade of light was a divine relic. It normally hung around her neck in the form of an ordinary-looking cross, but when she filled it

with her attuned psychic energy its true form as a sacred crossblade would be awakened, resulting in it transforming into a sword of light that could cut through all things!

If the sacred crossblade of light fell into wastelander hands or into the hands of a demonhunter who had a different type of psychic energy, it would be of no use at all despite its tremendous power.

Demonhunters were partially honored for their power, and partially because they were so incredibly few in number. Even in the blessed lands loved by the gods, very few people had the talent needed to become a demonhunter. As for the wastelands and its foul heathens who had been forsaken by the gods? They were born with tainted, corrupt blood in their veins. How could a place like this possibly give birth to someone with the talent needed to become a demonhunter?

Thunk! The Bloodsoaked Queen tossed a pitch-black staff to the ground. This staff was made of an unknown material. It looked very slick, but didn't reflect any light at all. It was roughly three feet long, and it was topped with a tri-edged screw-blade that was incredibly sharp. This was a weapon that could be used to stab or to hack, and in both situations it would create huge, gaping wounds.

The 'hilt' of this tri-bladed staff was round, metallic, and covered in squiggly lines that helped ensure the wielder was able to maintain a solid grip around it. At the very base of the staff was a mysterious rune that looked like the runes on the Queen's gloves and cross.

A faint ripple of power emanated from the staff. Although the aura was very weak, there was no mistaking it at all. Completely surprised, Cloudhawk picked the staff up. "So this is a relic as well?"

Is this kid really able to hear a so-called 'song' from divine relics? A puzzled look appeared on the Bloodsoaked Queen's face. Still, she didn't spend too much time on this question as she began to give a fairly simple explanation. "Rookie demonhunters are unable to take control over powerful relics, and so the Temple has created a number of low-grade weapons and armaments for them to use. This weapon is known as an 'exorcist staff'. Although it isn't really a relic, it has the same properties as relics."

"Are you giving this to me?" Cloudhawk felt shocked by this sudden display of favor. He lifted up the metal staff and gave it a few experimental twirls, then used his

knuckles to rap it. Even if it was nothing more than an ordinary weapon, it was still quite a sturdy and powerful one; there was no way it would be as easily hacked through as an ordinary iron sword.

"It's been a long time since low-grade relics like this were of any use to me." No trace of emotion could be heard from the Bloodsoaked Queen's hoarse voice. "Consider it my gift to you. Now, our accounts are settled. From this day forth, neither of us owe each other anything. You can leave now. Never come here again."

Damn, she's pretty heartless. Was it really necessary for her to draw such a clear line between the two of them? Wastelanders were human beings, same as her. Why were their lives supposedly worthless?

Cloudhawk heaved a sigh. After having lived with each other for several days, he had thought that the Queen was beginning to view him a bit differently. Apparently, she felt just as disdainful towards him as she had from the start.

Cloudhawk silently put away the exorcist staff, then said a single word solemnly: "Thanks."

"Don't thank me." The Queen turned and left the room, her hoarse and raspy voice ringing out behind her. "Sooner or later, Blackflag Outpost is going to be embroiled into a huge battle. If you want to stay alive, you need to leave this place immediately. This is my final warning to you. From this day forth, it'll be as though we've never met. You're on your own."

Cloudhawk slowly left the Queen's private residence. He stood in front of the entrance for a few moments, a blank look on his face and a rather uncomfortable feeling in his heart.

The Bloodsoaked Queen was very young, but possessed incredible power. Even in the elysian lands, she had to be an incredible figure, right? Cloudhawk was nothing more than a scavenger who had struggled for most of his life to stay alive in the ruins. The gulf between the two was as vast as the empyrean moat which separated the heavens from the earth. There was no way to bridge that gap.

For them to have met each other was nothing more than a complete accident, a twist of fate. Now, the lines of their destiny were about to untangle as they continued on their separate paths. In the end, it was guaranteed that they would never meet again.

Cloudhawk shook his head vigorously. What the hell was he even thinking about? This was nothing more than a brief, chance meeting. Cloudhawk had helped the Queen survive the most dangerous period of her life, and the Queen had repaid him by giving him what he desired most. Now, their accounts were settled. Neither owed the other. This was an excellent ending… right?

The light of the moon bathed the quiet outpost in its glow. In truth, the outpost was almost terrifyingly silent tonight. Exorcist staff in hand, Cloudhawk began the trip back to the mercenary outpost. Halfway there, his heart rate suddenly began to speed up as a feeling of incredible unease began to fill his entire body, making him feel as though he had suddenly been dunked into a pool of cold water. He had a premonition of intense danger!

“Who is it?!” Cloudhawk barked towards the dark alleyway up ahead of him, “Stop hiding! Come out!”

These words seemed to part the darkness as a black silhouette suddenly charged out, hurtling a knife straight towards Cloudhawk. This strike had been aimed with perfect timing and from the perfect angle. The knife seemed to be filled with all the power and skill the knife thrower could muster, with no wasted motion and no flowery flourishes. Without question, this came from a seasoned warrior, a veteran of a hundred battles.

An expert combatant was after his life!

Cloudhawk instinctively lashed out with his exorcist staff, knocking the knife aside. As the tri-blade staff clanged against the knife, the knife was split in half while just the slightest of scratches appeared on the tri-blade.

Although Cloudhawk had an absolute advantage in terms of weaponry, the difference in strength between the two was noticeable. His wrist blazed with pain, and the staff nearly flew out of his grasp.

Cloudhawk hurriedly scampered backwards a few steps. Before he even had a chance to catch his footing, the black-garbed man came charging towards him with a second strike. The second knife cut out in a powerful yet beautiful arc, filled with highly focused power. The trajectory of the strike ensured that there was nowhere for Cloudhawk to dodge at all. Fortunately, Cloudhawk’s reaction time was fast enough that he was able to block this second attack as well.

Clang! Sparks erupted in midair, briefly lighting up the darkness of the night. Cloudhawk was finally knocked off-balance and sent tumbling to the ground from the power of this blow. He was sent rolling backwards on the ground in a clumsy fashion. The black-garbed man seemed hell-bent on his death, sending out yet another knife-strike slicing through the dark night towards Cloudhawk with meteoric speed.

Chapter 37
Exorcist Staff

Cloudhawk had spent more than a full month 'training' every day with the mercenaries. Although he wasn't exactly strong, he wasn't a weakling either. Despite that, just two knife-strikes had knocked him completely off his game. That meant this bastard had to be roughly on par with some of the top-ranked members of the Tartarus mercenaries!

The knife gleamed as it came howling towards him like a meteor. There was nowhere to run and no way to block. It seemed as though all hope was lost!

Cloudhawk could feel the threat of death breathing down his neck, and his heart was filled with a mixture of shock, anger, and confusion. The rage in his chest and the madness deep inside his bones once more broke free from their shackles, as they had so long ago when he had killed that mutated hound. The adrenaline rush swept through every single part of his body, infiltrating every single cell and infusing him with strength!

He slapped the ground with his left hand, righting himself and somersaulting to his feet. He then swung his right arm, lashing out with the staff. The tri-bladed staff swept out like a tornado, smashing directly into the knife and once more kicking up a storm of sparks.

The black-garbed man was shocked. *The kid had to be moving nearly twice as fast as he was before!* And that wasn't the greatest transformation; the greatest transformation was in Cloudhawk's demeanor. Moments ago, Cloudhawk was like a gentle sheep that was about to be slaughtered. Now, he seemed to have transformed into a savage and infuriated wolf.

Cloudhawk let out a furious roar… then actually charged towards his enemy! He delivered five high-speed stabbing blows with his staff. There was no technique, no artifice, no subterfuge to these strikes; this was pure speed and viciousness! Every single strike seemed to howl through the air as Cloudhawk unleashed his latent, berserk side. It was as though he was going to kill this enemy no matter what, even if it cost him his own life!

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

The sound of metal on metal rang out as sparks continued to fly everywhere. The two exchanged multiple blows within a short period of time… and this time, it was Cloudhawk who was dominating the fight! The black-garbed man was forced onto the defensive, and he frantically blocked as he tried to deal with the shock he was feeling.

What the hell? The kid's as mad as friggin' Mad Dog. He's gone totally berserk!

However, this wasn't exactly the case. Whenever Mad Dog tasted blood, he would go into a completely berserk state where he had no control over himself at all. In contrast, Cloudhawk was able to maintain a modicum of clarity despite his berserk state. For example, he noticed that despite having launched a furious barrage of attacks his opponent was still able to defend as steady as a rock. Cloudhawk knew that this wasn't a fight to prolong, and so he suppressed the berserk emotions coursing through him and immediately turned to flee.

Cloudhawk had always relied on two things to keep himself alive – his preternaturally sharp bestial instincts, and power born from rage. The first was something he had been born with, while the latter was an ability that had been enhanced by the stone around his neck. However, it was evident that neither of these two things were going to be enough for him to deal with this foe in front of him.

I need to get the hell out of here, as fast as I can! If I can make it back to the mercenary base, there'll be nothing he can do to me! This was what Cloudhawk was counting on, but just moments after he started to flee, two more figures suddenly appeared out of nowhere and barred his path, their swords shooting towards him like a pair of thunderbolts descending from the night skies. He had seen no trace of them earlier, and he didn't see where they came from; they were like gusts of wind that had just blown in from a world beyond.

The timing and aim of these two swords were both immaculately perfect. They struck like a pincer, giving him nowhere to run and nowhere to hide!

Cloudhawk frantically struck out with his tri-bladed staff, but was only able to block one of the two swords. Just as the staff clanked against the first sword, the second sword came piercing towards his throat. Cloudhawk frantically tried to dodge, but the sword still sliced a bloody wound in his shoulder as it flew past him. Cloudhawk delivered a furious backhanded blow with his staff, but his opponent leapt away quite

agilely.

The two swordsmen were flanking Cloudhawk from the front while the saber-wielder was chasing after him from behind. His path forwards was blocked, while the path backwards was also sealed. Cloudhawk was now like an animal trapped in a cage. His bloodshot gaze swept across the three, and he then let out a bestial growl: “I don’t know any of you. Why do you want to kill me!”

There was no response!

Cloudhawk was now surrounded by all three assassins. They immediately moved to attack, not hesitating or pausing in the slightest or wasting a single breath on conversation. They moved in perfect harmony with precision and speed. They were true warriors, true elites, true assassins.

In terms of speed, timing, strength, and everything else, they worked together with perfect cohesion. By now, Cloudhawk could tell that there was nowhere for him to flee. He was surrounded by what felt like a ‘web’ of cold, metallic light. No matter where he moved or where he dodged, he would still be trapped within the web of attacks. The web of metallic death quickly began to shrink around him. In just another moment, his body would be torn asunder.

Damn, damn, damn! Cloudhawk was boiling with rage and resentment. Why the hell were these people attacking him? None of this made no sense! Was he about to die without even knowing who was behind it or why? No matter what, he refused to accept that this would be how his destiny ended!

“FUCK OFF!” If he couldn’t tell where the attacks were coming from, he wouldn’t even look at them. His mind was completely blank as he swept out with his staff… but as he did so, he could suddenly sense a strange sort of dormant energy in his body flow out into the staff.

The runes on the exorcist staff instantly lit up. The tri-blades on the top of the staff suddenly began to spin so quickly that they seemed to transform into a cylindrical shape. This high speed, high friction movement caused sparks to appear that could be seen with the naked eye. As the exorcist staff swept outwards, it suddenly let out an indescribable shriek as it tore through the air.

This wasn’t a staff-strike. This was the summoning of a windstorm! The three warriors

had never seen anything like this before. Despite their talent and experience, they were all stunned… and in that brief instant, the exorcist staff slammed towards them, shattering the two swords and the saber as if they were made out of fragile glass and reducing them into tiny fragments.

Even Cloudhawk was amazed to discover how powerful this strike from his exorcist staff was. It was actually beyond his ability to control. Right now, it wasn't Cloudhawk swinging the staff; it was the staff flying out with Cloudhawk attached to it! After completing the circular swing, the staff smashed directly into the ground.

BOOM!

The psychic energy burst out from the exorcist staff, striking out like a thunderbolt! The psychic storm kicked up by this explosion caused the metal fragments of the destroyed weapons to fly into the air, while the three attackers were blasted several meters backwards. Terrified, they scuttled backwards hurriedly before finally clambering to their feet.

"Let's get the hell outta here!" The three warriors were absolutely terrified, and they immediately moved to flee. They couldn't be blamed for their fear; Cloudhawk himself was about to piss his pants!

What the hell had just happened? How was it that the power of the exorcist staff had suddenly been unleashed? The Bloodsoaked Queen had told him that demonhunters needed to be able to wield psychic energy, which required natural talent, painstaking training, and the blessings of the gods. Cloudhawk was a wastelander who had lived in the wastelands his entire life. Even if he did have the natural talent, he had never had a chance to train in it. The blessings of the gods? He didn't even know what the gods were!

Could it be…? Cloudhawk suddenly thought back to the brief coma he had been in after that fight in the inn house. He had experienced a strange dream where he had met a strange man who spoke of giving Cloudhawk some power. When Cloudhawk had woken up he didn't really notice anything strange, and so he had believed it to be naught more than a dream. Could the dream have been real?

Cloudhawk lifted up the exorcist staff, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He could clearly sense the ripples emanating from inside the staff. Suddenly, it felt as though a guitar string had just been plucked within his mind, causing an indescribably

marvelous sound to cry out.

The tri-blades on the staff once more began to rotate at high speeds. Cloudhawk struck at a nearby rock with the staff. A tremendous surge of resonant power instantly swept out from the staff, and the rock was instantly shattered into countless pieces.

Badass. This is freaking badass! Even Mad Dog would find it hard to resist such a heavy strike! Although Cloudhawk was fairly weak in many aspects, if he could use relics he would have a chance to be catapulted to the general level of the Bloodsoaked Queen.

Cloudhawk was incredibly excited. How could he not be? He had been indescribably weak, but he now realized that he was capable of tremendous power. Naturally, his first instinct was to test it out even further. But just as he was about to strike a third time, he felt his vision grow dark. Pain flooded his mind, causing him to nearly lose his balance.

It seemed as though these attacks would exhaust his psionic energy. There was no way to use those abilities nonstop!

Can't stay here. Those three were so confident in being able to kill me, they didn't bring any bows or guns. If they come back fully armed, I'm going to be completely screwed.

Even though Cloudhawk now possessed tremendous destructive power, he was still very weak in many aspects. Sure, he might be able to beat back Mad Dog in a head-on clash, but if the two were in a real battle Mad Dog would never give him a chance to do that. *Hell, Mad Dog would probably chop me into mincemeat before I even had a chance to strike!*

The wastelands remained a dangerous place. He couldn't be too brash. This bit of power he had just gained was far from being enough!

Still, Cloudhawk remembered how the Bloodsoaked Queen had said that exorcist staffs were merely the lowest-level relics, relics that were mass-produced. Only newly trained rookie demonhunters would use these relics… which meant that this tri-bladed staff really wasn't all that powerful, at least by the standards of the elysian lands.

In other words… if he could find more powerful relics, he'd be able to unleash even more powerful attacks! Cloudhawk smiled at the thought, then put away the staff and quickly disappeared into the darkness of the night.

……

The night was only growing darker. The cold light of the moon shone down from the skies, casting its pristine light upon the endless desolation of the wastelands.

Cloudhawk was squatting within his own room, his hands clasped together and his face red with excitement. Even the veins on his body were popping out! He looked like he was suffering from some sort of strange, incurable disease, or as though he was trying to do something incredibly difficult with nothing to show for it.

"AAAAAH!" Cloudhawk let out a frustrated cry, then fell to the ground like a deflated balloon. He panted loudly, a look of frustration and defeat on his face. A stone lay quietly within his hands, not having changed one bit this entire time.

Why wasn't the blasted thing doing anything!? Cloudhawk was clearly capable of using divine relics, but no matter how hard he tried or how hard he focused on the stone, he was unable to have any effect on it at all. The stone was still nothing more than a stone; it didn't seem to have any special effects at all!

Cloudhawk felt incredibly, incredibly disappointed! Still, he felt certain that this stone contained some sort of inconceivable power within it. To this very day, he could clearly remember what had happened to him when he had found this stone within that dark underground passageway. He had been teleported straight into a completely foreign land.

The memories of that experience had been engraved into his very bones! In that instant, Cloudhawk felt as though he had gained a brief glimpse into the true nature of all things. It seemed as though all things were in reality nothing more than a collection of strings. When these strings thrummed at different frequencies they resulted in different types of matter being formed, resulting in the world around them.

Actually, come to think of it, the 'divine relics' really didn't seem to be that strange or mysterious. Cloudhawk could sense that these relics were capable of changing the frequency at which those 'strings' vibrated, causing matter to change and transform on a fundamental level. This was why they were able to unleash inconceivable amounts of power out of seemingly nowhere! This was also the reason why Cloudhawk continued to hear a 'song' from them.

Cloudhawk had grown up alongside the old-timer. Ever since he was young, he had

heard the old-timer speak of the things which had existed during the Old Times. In Cloudhawk's eyes, those things were full of mysteries and marvels. Perhaps divine relics were just products of an even higher-level technology?

If he had mentioned this to the Bloodsoaked Queen, she would almost certainly have executed him for his blasphemous claim. To a pious devotee like her, divine relics were the products of the miracles which the almighty gods had bestowed upon their faithful. How could they be compared to artificial items created by mortal hands?

Cloudhawk himself didn't really believe in or care about these so-called 'gods'. If they truly were all-powerful and benevolent, why wouldn't they save all of mankind?

Why wouldn't they save the wastelands?

Chapter 38
Mission

Cloudhawk was brooding over the recent ambush. Those ambushers had been amongst the most skilled warriors the outpost had to offer, and enemies in the shadows were always harder to deal with than enemies you could see. If he was constantly harassed and stalked by these powerful assassins, he'd never be able to rest easily.

And so, the very next morning he immediately reported this matter to the other mercenaries.

Mad Dog was slightly intrigued. "Who the fuck would want to ambush you?"

Cloudhawk had no idea either. "All I know is that those three were really skilled. There has to be something strange going on."

"Oho, is that so?" Mad Dog scratched his ears, then said in an intentionally puzzled voice, "All three of them were really powerful 'experts', but they still couldn't kill you, eh? Poor bastards… I wonder how the hell those fuckers even managed to stay alive for so long."

All the mercenaries roared with laughter when they heard this. Cloudhawk hurriedly revealed the slash-wound on his shoulder. "I'm not kidding, you guys! Look, I got stabbed here! I almost died!"

Even if the kid really had been attacked by someone, the mercenaries refused to believe that those people were 'experts'; if three of them couldn't even kill a single rookie like Cloudhawk, how skilled could the possibly be?

"Arrright already. It was just an ambush. No big deal. Shit, who hasn't been ambushed? And why the hell were you running around outside anyhow? I told you not to! It's your own damn fault." Mad Dog waved his hand impatiently, interrupting Cloudhawk. He then said in a loud voice, "Listen up, everyone. All of you need to stay here and not go running around. Something big is about to go down."

Right at this moment, the sound of Woola's barks could suddenly be heard as Slyfox pulled Woola into the courtyard with a large steel chain around his neck. "Gather around, everyone!"

Woola walked towards Cloudhawk, letting out a few wild barks as a savage, threatening look appeared on his face. Most likely, he was quite irritated by Cloudhawk not having gone over to clean his kennel out over the past few days. After having lived here for so long, Cloudhawk no longer feared this strange freak as much as he had when he had first arrived, and so he pretended not to see anything.

"I've got good news, everyone." The fat man's voice boomed out, his face ruddy with excitement. "The big guy just sent us a new mission, and the rewards will be enough to keep us fed for three years. Make your preparations, because we're headin' out immediately."

The 'big guy'? Was this the figure Cloudhawk had seen last time, the black-clothed man who wore that strange breathing mask?

Cloudhawk had a very uncomfortable feeling about this. That fellow had offered a bountiful reward for the stone Cloudhawk had found; was it possible that he knew some of the stone's secrets? If he managed to discover that Cloudhawk was the one holding the stone, Cloudhawk would probably end up dead.

Slyfox began to issue orders to the various mercenaries. Mantis and two of the mercs would stay behind to stand guard over their home while all the rest would take part in this mission… including their newest rookie, Cloudhawk. In other words, a total of twenty-seven figures would mobilize for this assignment. This was essentially all the power they had to spare.

Slyfox was both a cautious yet cunning fellow. For him to go out on such a limb and devote so many resources to this mission was most likely due to the fact that the offer really was too good to refuse… but that also meant that the danger they would face was similarly enormous.

The mercenaries quickly began to make their preparations. As for Slyfox, he beamed merrily as he walked straight towards Cloudhawk. "You are pretty lucky, kid; your first mission will be an incredibly profitable one. I'll tell you straight up – once we finish this mission, we'll have all the wine and meat we want to eat, and all the big-breasted, big-butted women we want to enjoy. You'll be thanking me for days on end!"

Like hell. Cloudhawk had learned from his previous mistakes; he'd rather be locked up with a starving wolf for 48 hours than to believe a word this fat man said. Hell, he'd rather believe the wolf wouldn't eat him! The more the fatty swore he was telling the truth, the more nervous Cloudhawk felt.

"…Can I stay back here with Mantis and guard our home instead?"

"No way!" Slyfox knew exactly what Cloudhawk was worried about, an extremely unhappy look appeared on his chubby face. "Kid, this aint gonna be like last time, alright? Ask anyone, I never fuck over my own people. You don't got shit to worry about, unnerstand? Fuckin' hell, yer young and useless. Listen up – you don't have any say in the matter. You are going!"

Slyfox forced a ragged cloth into Cloudhawk's hands. "Read this intelligence report carefully and stop wasting time. Forty minutes from now, we're heading out. If anyone wastes so much as a single minute, I'm breakin' their fuckin' legs!"

Cloudhawk stared at the tattered piece of cloth in his hands, reading the contents within it twice.

Mission: To hunt down and kill a mutated rat king.

Mission description: The employer has located a lair of mutated rats located not too far from the western sides of Blackflag Outpost. These mutated dire rats are roughly the size of wolf-dogs but are incredibly fast and possess powerful offensive attacks. We conservatively estimate that the entire lair has between one to two hundred rats, but our estimates may be in error.

These particular dire rats have undergone all sorts of strange mutations, and they possess certain powers which other dire rats do not have. The dire rat king in particular is an extremely valuable and unique specimen. Your mission is to find the dire rat king. Conditions permitting, capture it alive – your payment shall be increased by an additional 50% if you can do so. If you cannot capture it alive, do your best to preserve the body as much as possible and keep it undamaged.

Rats were always tenacious creatures; no matter what types of natural disasters occurred, they would still be able to quickly adapt, survive, and flourish. As a result, there were now many different types of rats in the world. However, based on the mutated rats which Cloudhawk had seen in the past, they weren't exactly very

powerful.

As for the mission report, it similarly didn't seem to suggest that this would be a particularly difficult mission. And yet, Cloudhawk knew that there was no way things could be as simple as this. Their employer hadn't described the various abilities these mutated rats possessed, but the promised rewards testified as to how deadly this mission would be. And in truth, Cloudhawk was completely stunned by the value of this contract.

Hard currency was rarely used in the wastelands, with barter in gunpowder, firearms, weapons, medicines, and food being the most common forms of trade. Aside from these common items, there was something else that was quite expensive and beloved by many. Certain special materials could be extracted from mutated animals and plants, then mixed together according to an extremely complicated alchemical formula to form a type of medicine that was known as an 'enhancement mutagen'.

Enhancement mutagens had an extremely simple effect – they stimulated and accelerated the body into developing metapowers or strengthening existing ones, allowing the user to become even more powerful… and that was exactly what would be awarded to them if they completed this mission. Enhancement mutagens, as well as many other valuable items.

This was a staggeringly valuable fortune! Missions like this truly were rare. Not only would it bring them enormous wealth, it could also allow the company as a whole to grow much stronger. Cloudhawk was a newbie; if he didn't take part in this mission, he wouldn't be given any part of the spoils or receive any of the rewards. *Maybe Slyfox told the truth for once. Maybe he really is doing this out of the kindness of his heart.*

There would be a certain degree of danger, of course. The wastelands had been forsaken by the gods, and so manna would never descend from the heavens. The organization which had issued this mission was one of the major powers of the wastelands, and every single mission they issued had most certainly been judged carefully before the relevant rewards were assigned. The promised payout really was directly correlated to the danger of the mission.

Cloudhawk's dream was to leave the wastelands, but actually delving through the wastes was no easy feat! More than anything else, he needed to grow more powerful and acquire more armor and armaments. How could he possibly ignore such a tempting, lucrative opportunity? Cloudhawk immediately felt much more relaxed

about this mission.

Mad Dog began to issue equipment to the rest of the Tartarus mercenaries. Nothing in the wastelands was ever handed out for free; if you wanted equipment, you had to pay a fee for it. The equipment pool for the mercenary company was considered shared property, and so each person had to earn 'credit' in order to take equipment out of the pool. Credit was earned in a very simple way; you donated equipment or items you didn't need to the pool, and you would earn credit for it. You would also earn credit for going out on missions alongside the rest of the company.

Cloudhawk had two guns but no bullets. Three points of credit were needed for a single shotgun shell, while just one point of credit was needed for an ordinary 9 mm bullet. Generally speaking, a single strip of rat jerky also cost a single point of credit. Cloudhawk was brand new to Tartarus, and hadn't been out on any missions during the past month; how could he possibly afford any of this expensive equipment?

Mad Dog waved his hand impatiently. "Fuck it, I'll give it to you on loan. You can pay me back after this mission is done. I'll just charge you a tiny bit of interest, just 50%!"

50% was 'just a tiny bit' of interest?! "You are a freaking robber!"

"The fuck you talking about, kid?" Mad Dog cursed loudly, "I don't even know if you'll survive this mission. This isn't robbery, this is a high-risk loan, got it? I'm taking on the risk of getting nothing back at all. If you don't want to take my offer, you can go fuck yourself."

There was nothing he could do. Cloudhawk had to just hold his nose and accept the offer. A short while later, ten pistol bullets and four shotgun shells fell into his pouch.

Blackflag Outpost's gunpowder was all hand-crafted, and as a result the quality wasn't all that high, and the quantity was fairly low as well. Still, at least it was safe to use… usually.

"Right. Your leather armor is already finished." Mad Dog tossed a suit of wolf-skin leather armor to Cloudhawk. This suit of armor had been crafted from the alpha rotwolf Cloudhawk had slain, and it was fairly sturdy and had good defensive properties. "The cost of producing this armor was around twenty points of credit. Need any close combat weapons?"

"I already have what I need."

A poor broke bastard like Cloudhawk would avoid using firearms whenever possible; as a result, cold weapons would always be what he primarily relied upon. The mercenaries held quite a few cold weapons in their armory, including sabers, sword, hammers, and axes. Cloudhawk already had his exorcist staff, and so he needed no other types of equipment.

“Where the hell did you even find that thing, kid?” Mad Dog glanced sideways at the staff on Cloudhawk’s back. His experienced eye revealed to him that this tri-edged screw-bladed staff was an extremely sharp weapon that could be used to stab or to slash. If it pierced into an opponent’s body, even if the opponent didn’t die right away he would still find it difficult to stem the bloodloss from such a jagged wound. It truly was a fine close combat weapon.

“Here’s a skinning knife. Take it.” Mad Dog tossed Cloudhawk a short dagger then instructed, “We’re about to head out. You’ll be responsible for keeping Woola on his leash. For this mission, you are in charge of Woola.”

The Tartarus company had always used Woola as their guard dog, but this mission was rather special; given how alert Woola’s nose was, his tracking abilities would most likely come in handy. Thus, they brought him along as well.

The reason they assigned a rookie like Cloudhawk to be in charge of Woola was partially because the two of them had become fairly close over the past month. It was also because they knew that Cloudhawk had very little actual combat experience and was fairly weak. Woola was a bloodthirsty savage, but at least he was also a powerful combatant. Assigning Woola to Cloudhawk was a way for them to help the newbie out.

Woola let out a few barking growls as he ran over on all six legs. He seemed to be quite displeased by the fact that he would be under Cloudhawk’s control. Woola’s strength was simply incredible; even though Cloudhawk was now much stronger than when he had first arrived, he was still essentially being pulled forwards by Woola rather than vice versa.

“Car’s here!”

“Prepare to head out!”

The mercenaries were all fully outfitted with armor, masks, cloaks, and other strange weapons and types of equipment. This squad truly did represent the uniqueness of

the wastelands and its character.

Chapter 39
Heading Out

The wastelands were vast beyond end. It was nearly impossible to travel through them on foot, making reliable forms of transportation incredibly important. The quality of the transportation network in the wastelands was uniformly poor. Although large excavator outposts often had tamed beasts that could be used for transport or shoddily-assembled vehicles, there was a limit to how many vehicles or beasts they could acquire. In the end, only a tiny fraction of the people ever had a chance to use them.

Given how innately ferocious most mutabeasts were, there were very few which could be tamed and trained to serve as mounts. It also took an extremely long period of time to find and capture young beasts, then raise them into full adulthood. This entire process was very expensive and had a high chance of failure, making every single mutabeasts mount an incredibly valuable possession.

As for the wastelander vehicles, they were assembled from a wide variety of random parts, most of which had been dug up from below the ground. Other parts were taken from captured vehicles that had been won on the field battles. Some of the crudest parts needed could even be self-manufactured! In general, it was quite a feat to be able to get these things to even move. However, you could forget about producing a vehicle that could truly conquer the rugged terrain and inhospitable environs of the wastelands.

Mutabeast mounts needed food and water, while wastelander vehicles needed gasoline.

Due to these various constraints, most wastelanders were confined to a very small area around the outposts. Only blood-drinking madmen like the mercenaries of the Tartarus company would dare venture farther afield and into more dangerous areas. The Tartarus mercenaries were amongst the oldest organizations of Blackflag Outpost, and they had built up a collection of transports over the years.

This time, Slyfox mobilized five wastelands vehicles. Four were off-road vehicles while the fifth was a freight truck. It had been quite some time since Blackflag Outpost had

seen a caravan like this set out!

The bumpers on the Tartarus vehicles had all been torn off and replaced by sharp spikes, while the car doors, roofs, and tires were all studded with spikes as well. These four ridiculously barbaric-looking vehicles looked like enormous steel hedgehogs as their gear-like tires tore through the ground, which was why the mercenaries often referred to them as their 'iron hedgehogs'.

As for their freight trucks, they were enormous in size. Each freight truck had eight tires, and they had two enormous slabs of steel fastened to the front of the car, with each slab of steel angled at 30 degrees. Behind the truck was an ugly cage-like carriage. On the whole, it looked like some sort of skeletal creepy-crawly creature. And so, the Tartarus mercenaries had given it a friendly nickname – the 'iron lizard'.

The Tartarus mercenaries often used these vehicles. In order to avoid mishaps and vehicular damage, they spent quite some time adjusting them and reinforcing them as necessary. Although the vehicles remained exceptionally ugly and had no aesthetics to them at all, from a functional standpoint they were more or less decently equipped to deal with the harshness of the wastelands.

In addition to the vehicles, there were eight bigfoot birds that were letting out strange cries as eight fully equipped mercenaries rode atop them.

Cooke was going to be the leader for the mounted mercenaries on this mission. Cooke was fairly strong even amongst the mercenaries, and he was more than qualified to be the captain of the mounted division. His weapon of choice was a long billhook that was seven feet long! This weapon had the best attributes of both scythes and spears, and it could be used in a mounted charge and also be used to slash and hack. It was the perfect weapon for a cavalryman.

They had a main force, auxiliary forces, scouts, rearguards, training, and tactics. This mercenary company would be considered an elite outfit anywhere in the entire wastelands… and every single member of the company was exceptionally talented and very experienced. They were extremely powerful in combat and more than able to deal with the vast majority of dangers.

However… what was the most dangerous thing in the wastelands?

The schemes of other men!

Terrifying natural disasters, brutal beast waves… in the end, nothing held a candle compared to the dark hearts of other men. Humans are by nature communal animals who need to live amongst others of their race, and so it is necessary to always be wary of the danger which other people could pose. Countless real life examples had proven that sometimes, humans could be even more savage than any beast and even more dreadful than any natural disaster.

This was an era of chaos. It was almost impossible to find a group of brothers and friends that you could truly rely on.

The mercenaries might be crude, rough, lawless, and brutal, but at least they were very unified and loyal to each other. This was something which Cloudhawk had slowly come to realize during the past month he had been with them. The reason why the Tartarus mercenaries had been able to survive for so long was most likely due to their unity, something which was incredibly rare in a place like the wastelands.

“Come back soon!” The other warriors of the outpost all waved farewell to the mercenaries. Even Grizzly and the members of the elite squad were there to send them off. Every so often, their gazes would flicker as they glanced at Cloudhawk, strange looks in their eyes.

The gates to the outpost swung open. The mercenaries were officially heading out!

Cloudhawk, Woola, and the eight bigfoot bird riders were all arranged to ride aboard the iron lizard. Bigfoot birds were excellent mounts, but they only had so many of them. If they were forced to run a hundred kilometers alongside the vehicles, they’d probably be exhausted by the time they were actually needed in battle.

The five vehicles rumbled out in a straight line. Two iron hedgehogs led the way while two brought up the rear, with the iron lizard being at the very middle as this squad of elite mercenaries drove deeper into the rolling yellow sands of the desert wastelands.

The wastelands were so vast as to engender despair upon those who tried to traverse it, and countless ruins and skeletons were hidden beneath its sands. It had been roughly a month and a half since the last time Cloudhawk had traversed these sands, but this time his emotions were completely different.

The Tartarus mercenaries looked like a long, sinuous yellow dragon that slowly wound its way out of Blackflag Outpost’s territory and made its way deeper into the

seared desert wastelands.

None of them noticed that right at this moment, a group of men outfitted in strange equipment were hidden furtively nearby the outpost. It seemed as though they were keeping a close watch on what was happening inside the outpost.

The leader of this group was a muscular man whose seemed to brim with strength and vitality. His skin was raven-black and gleamed with a slick oil that made him look almost metallic. He was completely bald, but two crude-looking bull horns could be seen atop his head. As for his weapon, it was an enormous greatsword that was the height of a normal human being.

This weapon had to weigh at least a hundred pounds. Only a man of enormous strength would be capable of wielding such a thing… and clearly, this man was one. Just as clearly, he was a mutant. But despite his crude appearance and his brutal demeanor, he had a pair of cold, viper-like eyes that were filled with deathly calm as he stared unblinkingly at that settlement in the sands - Blackflag Outpost.

Right at this moment, a comparatively slimmer mutant came running towards him. This person's entire body was covered with grayish-white feathers. He had a sharp mouth and bird-like feet, and wings were growing out of his back that suggested he was perhaps capable of flight. This second person let out a soft growl: "Number two, things are gonna work out better this time, right? This demonhunter is pretty tough. Number four died in her hands."

"Don't worry, number three. I've already looked carefully into this matter. She came to the wastelands by herself, and there is no chance that any other demonhunters will appear here. Do you really think this woman is strong enough to fight against our master, all by herself?" The horned man's eyes flickered with murderous hatred. "This woman killed a number of our friends. Let's make her death a slow one."

The winged mutant let out an owl-like hoot of laughter.

She had dared to journey deep into the wastelands by herself? She dared to try and hunt down their master by herself? What a foolish woman!

……

The endless sands of the wasteland danced in the air, rising upwards towards the skies and the setting sun as a wild wind blew through the wastelands. It was dusk now. The

wastelands were at sea level, and the blazing red sun was slowly sinking downwards past the horizon. A squad of vehicles suddenly emerged from the horizon in front of the sun, looking almost like a mirage generated by the foul, twisted air.

The land in front of the convoy was already looking quite different from the lands they had left. All sorts of completely random buildings and ruins were intermingled together in layered rings, and all sorts of ancient refuse and garbage could be seen everywhere. A number of enormous, ancient metal buildings looked as though they had been planted into the sea of sand. They looked almost like giant shipwrecked ships that had sunken halfway into the sea.

Slyfox was in the leading, fastest vehicle. He turned his head and hollered backwards, "Everyone, slow down a bit. We've entered the mission area. The geography here is pretty weird, and there're a lot of ruins here. Be careful, all of you!"

"Got it!" the mercenaries all simultaneously barked out energetically.

Woola noticed that Cloudhawk had actually started to doze off a bit. He opened his massive maw, then gave Cloudhawk a hard bite on the thigh. Cloudhawk was like a cat whose tail had been stepped on, and he very nearly fell off the ugly iron lizard.

"Woola, what the hell!" But Woola only barked right into his face.

Mad Dog was using a tattered piece of cloth to polish his snow-bright machetes, a crude cigarette was hanging from his lips. He mumbled indistinctly, "Ruins like this are the perfect place for mutabeasts to hide… and there might be sweeper units hiding here as well. Starting now, you need to keep your eyes peeled."

Cooke offered a lit cigarette to Cloudhawk. "Want a smoke?"

Cloudhawk shook his head. "I don't smoke."

Cooke smirked. "You don't smoke? You flippin' pansy."

Cloudhawk was too proud to take an insult like that lying down. He angrily grabbed the cigarette, then took a very deep puff. The crude ingredients Blackflag Outpost used to produce cigarettes instantly assaulted his lungs, making him feel like a ball of fire had just flown into his throat and was burning him from inside. Cloudhawk coughed so loud, he nearly passed out for lack of air.

“HAH!”

“Rookie’s completely useless.”

“Drink some water and calm down.” One of the kinder mercenaries tossed a canteen of water to Cloudhawk, who lifted it to his mouth and gulped it down without even thinking. Alas, it seemed as though the canteen was filled with acid, not water. Cloudhawk’s face instantly turned beet-red and he immediately spewed all of the liquid out.

Motherfucker. That was moonshine!

The mercenaries slapped their legs as they roared with laughter. Ever since this kid had joined their ranks, he had provided them with endless amusement. During this past month, they had teased him rather unmercifully whenever they had nothing better to do.

Right at this moment, a voice rang out from the leading vehicle. It was one of the mercenaries calling out: “Careful, careful! There’s something up ahead!”

The mercenaries instantly went on full alert, and Cloudhawk hurriedly pulled out his staff. A group of animals had suddenly appeared to the front and left of their convoy. There were roughly twenty of the creatures, and they were roughly the size of wolf-dogs. They had red eyes, their fur looked as tough as steel, and they were running at incredible speed as they moved straight towards the convoy.

“Dire rats!” The words came unbidden from Cloudhawk’s lips. These creatures were, without a question, the dire rats that had been described in the mission description. These things really were astonishingly large. Although they still looked like rats, they were nearly as large as ordinary rotwolves. Cloudhawk had never seen such enormous rats before.

So they had finally found their targets! Two of the mercenaries drew their shortbows, then let fly two arrows. Two of the dire rats let out miserable screeches as they collapsed to the floor. When the other dire rats saw this, they seemed to understand that they were in danger and all of them turned to flee towards another direction.

“Hah!”

“You aren’t running anywhere!”

Two of the vehicles accelerated after them. One of the enormous mutant rats was struck head-on and crushed beneath an enormous tire, its innards bursting out of its body. The mercenaries continued to accelerate, managing to crush a few more of the dire rats. The feeling of flesh being crushed beneath their vehicles was absolutely intoxicating to them.

“Chase’m down!”

“Crush’m all!”

Two of the iron hedgehogs were already far ahead of the rest of the convoy, and they managed to crush and kill seven or eight of the dire rats. No matter how fierce and savage the dire rats were, they were still made of flesh and blood; how could they possibly resist being crushed by these metal monsters? *Maybe this mission wouldn’t be as tough as they thought!*

But just as Cloudhawk was thinking this, he suddenly heard a startled cry from up ahead.

“Watch out!” One of the iron hedgehogs suddenly lost its balance, kicking up an enormous storm of sand as it flew into the air, flipped over, then came crashing to the ground. Fortunately, the mercenaries seated atop the iron hedgehog were all very nimble. As soon as the vehicle had lost its balance, they immediately fled and so avoided being crushed underneath.

What the hell had happened? Why had a perfectly fine vehicle suddenly flipped over?

The other four vehicles came to a halt. Cloudhawk pulled out a cloth and used it to cover his face, protecting it from the blowing sands. Black tri-bladed staff in hand, he disembarked and followed the other mercenaries over to find out what was going on.

“Slyfox, Mad Dog, look here. This…”

Cloudhawk squeezed in to take a closer look. The overturned iron hedgehog was planted firmly into the ground, its two front tires apparently smeared with some sort of green liquid that was incredibly corrosive. The tires had been almost completely melted, and even the metal parts had suffered severe damage. This vehicle had more or less been completely wrecked.

“Acid! One of those mutant rats probably had acid blood inside it. The mission report

didn't say anything about acid rats!" Slyfox began to frown as he scanned the surroundings. "Screw it. The geography here is very complicated, and we won't be able to use this car any further. Let's find a safe place to spend the night. We'll finish mapping this place out tomorrow."

The mercenaries couldn't help but all mutter at the bad luck of it all. As for Cloudhawk, he was simply amazed. These mutant rats were incredible; their blood was apparently so acidic that it could corrode even metal. If any of it fell on him, his flesh and bones would probably all rot away. Hell, even a single drop of that acid would be enough to ruin him!

Cooke walked past Cloudhawk and patted him on the shoulders. "All sorts of weird critters in the world these days. Let's go!"

Chapter 40
A Trap

The blue skies were clear and devoid of all clouds, but sand continued to descend upon the world like snow. The golden rays of the fiery sun filled the wastelands with light, causing the grit to crackle and pop under the heat. The brutal heat baked the ground so much that cracks could be seen everywhere.

The searing heat of the sun was many times more intense than it had been during the Old Times. The vast majority of the creatures who had lived in the Old Times would be unable to survive such temperatures, but those weaker creatures had long ago been transformed into dusty, dry bones. The only creatures who could survive were those who had already adapted to this new, brutal environment.

Mad Dog let out a bestial howl as he swung his two machetes. Two of the giant rats next to him were instantly chopped in half, and a large amount of foul, corrupted blood sprayed out of their bodies.

Right after he had dealt with these two, another one suddenly charged towards him. Mad Dog dodged sideways, avoiding the giant rat's furious charge. Cloudhawk seized the moment to nimbly charge forwards, giving the giant rat no time to flee as he thrust his tri-bladed staff into its head.

"Careful!"

"Another acid rat!"

Cooke led the bigfoot cavalry in a hasty retreat from the front lines, a large group of giant rats chasing behind them. One of the rats looked somewhat smaller, but it was rounder and its skin looked an oily green color. Anyone who took a closer look at the rats would be able to notice that it looked rather different.

Acid rats were a type of special mutated rat. They contained numerous acid sacs inside their body, and they normally would slowly build up and store powerful acid within those sacs. When they needed to fight, they would be able to spit acid up to several meters at their targets. The worst thing was that not only did they have acid sacs in

their bodies, their skin was covered with large amounts of acid as well. Any ordinary weapon used to stab one of them would be instantly corroded and rendered useless, and the acidic blood spraying from the wound would also be enough to cause enormous harm to anyone splashed by it.

One of their iron hedgehogs had been ruined yesterday by one of these creatures!

Pff. Pff. Two globes of acid came flying towards them! Cloudhawk and Mad Dog hurriedly dodged, and the two giant rats they had slain just moments ago were hit head-on by the acid. Their tough fur and flesh quickly began to steam and hiss as it melted into a puddle of bile, leaving only the bones behind… but a few moments later, even the bones started to melt.

Mad Dog howled, "Kill it, quick!"

Cloudhawk switched the tri-blade staff from his right hand to his left hand, then pulled out his revolver. Just as the acid rat was about to attack a second time, Cloudhawk shot it straight in the mouth. This was a lethal strike. The creature instantly slumped to the ground, its entire body starting to dissolve as the acid began to pool around it and corrode a hole into the ground.

Now that the acid rat was dead, Mad Dog had nothing else to worry about. His machetes rose and fell as though he was chopping vegetables, and he instantly chopped four of those enormous rats into mincemeat. Woola came bounding over as well to help out, and soon the giant rats were finally and completely disposed of.

Cloudhawk wiped the blood off of his tri-bladed staff. As he was doing so, Cooke came riding over on his bigfoot bird. "Slyfox found a cave for us. We've already swept the perimeter clean. We can go hide there for now."

Mad Dog and Cloudhawk followed Cooke towards the cave. It had been a vicious battle, and a number of them had been injured. The mercenary company looked a bit bedraggled.

Mad Dog's irascible temper had been thoroughly aroused. He crushed a large rock to pieces beneath his boot, then began to curse loudly. "The mission report was complete bullshit. They estimated around two hundred rats, but there has to be at least five hundred of the little fuckers!"

Not only were these giant rats tough to deal with, there were several times as many of

them as had been reported. Right now, they couldn't even be sure as to exactly how many of the creatures existed.

Rather tired, Cloudhawk slumped against the entrance to the cave as he inspected his revolver. He had used up a total of three bullets. He reloaded the revolver, then re-holstered it by his waist.

This location offered them a good vantage point, allowing them to clearly see everything in the area off to a distance of ten kilometers. From here, the ruins in this place looked like giant centipedes that squiggled in the ground, forming a large number of squat 'mountain' ridges.

From here, he could see a large number of strange buildings and destroyed statues. One squat mountain was particularly eye-catching; it looked almost as though it had been sliced through by an enormous shearing knife, leaving behind a smooth, slick surface on top. However, right on top of it there was a sharp pyramid that was roughly ten or so meters long that 'grew' out of the mountain in a strange manner.

The metallic pyramid had been severely corroded. In both material and form, it looked very different from the other buildings of the Old Times. It looked more like it had been created in another world and planted here.

"Weird, right?" The bear-sized Cooke walked over to Cloudhawk. "This place is a classic example of dimensionally overlapping. Supposedly, long ago our world suddenly began to suffer from dimensional overlapping for some strange reason. The clash of dimensions resulted in the destruction of the old civilization and changed our world. All sorts of strange things were brought into our world. That thing over there? It's a good example of something from another world. That's why it looks so bizarre."

"How do you even know these things?" Cloudhawk looked skeptically at the man. "You are just making this stuff up."

"Bah! Two years ago, when I was out on a mission, I encountered a bunch of weirdoes who called themselves 'seekers'. They were the ones who told me all this. Hell, I don't know if any of it is true either!" Cooke lit a cigarette as he sat down, then offered one to Cloudhawk as well. "World's gone to shit. Doesn't really matter, I suppose. Cig?"

Cloudhawk now had a little more experience than before. This time, he took a much smaller puff on the cigarette but he still ended up coughing a few times. "Seekers?

What are seekers?"

"No clue. Bunch of crazy dudes that spend all their searching for the 'truth' and the 'answer'. All they want is to bring back the civilization and the technology that was lost to us ages ago. Still, they seem to be pretty influential in the wastelands." Cooke shook his head, then tossed another canteen over to Cloudhawk. "You'll find all sorts of weirdoes in the wastelands. Nothing to be surprised over."

"True. Nothing to be surprised over." Cloudhawk took a sniff, first verifying that it was water before he took a large gulp from the canteen. A cool, refreshing feeling permeated his body.

"Come to think of it, you didn't do half-bad just now. I didn't expect that you could fight, kid."

Cloudhawk responded rather irritably, "You guys spent a month beating the shit out of me every day. Is it really that surprising that I learned a few tricks?"

Cooke began to roar with laughter. "Not bad, kid. You hid it from everyone. Let's spar a bit once we get back home."

Cloudhawk snorted. "I'll knock your teeth out."

"That's a pretty ballsy claim. I'll remember it!"

"Everyone, gather around!" Slyfox summoned everyone to him, then proclaimed: "This mission is more complicated than we expected. We have no idea how many rats there are, but judging from the current situation there has to be at least five hundred of the little bastards. This place is too big; there's no way for us to scout out the entire place."

The mercenaries began to mutter and curse. Mad Dog said irritably, "Then have you come up with an idea? You can't seriously expect us to fight against this many giant rats."

Slyfox was the first captain of the Tartarus mercenaries, and he was also their principal mastermind. Generally speaking, it was his job to find solutions to any thorny problems they encountered.

"A very stupid idea."

“A stupid idea?”

“There are twenty-five of us. So long as we can avoid fighting more than forty of those giant rats at once, and so long as we can avoid making any major mistakes, we won’t suffer any casualties in battle.” Slyfox hesitated a few seconds, then continued. “I’ve already scanned the local area. There’s a couple of flat-topped mountains in the area around us with very few places for the rats to hide. We still have plenty of water, and we can eat most of the ordinary giant rats. In my opinion, we can fight and win a war of attrition against them.”

“Starting now, we aren’t going to go any deeper into this place; the only thing we’re gonna do is hunt down small packs of those giant rats. If we encounter large swarms of them, we’ll figure out a way to split’m up and then trap them in batches. We’ll slowly wipe’m all out in a safe, stable manner as we advance… and in the end, we’ll find that rat king!”

So the plan was for them to slowly wipe out the rats through attrition? After they killed a few hundred of the critters, they would then come up with a way to kill the rat king? This really was a pretty stupid idea. But, it also was a potentially effective one.

Cloudhawk let out a yawn. It looked like they were going to be busy.

The Tartarus mercenaries were elite wastelander warriors. Each of them had their own unique skills, giving them tremendous power and flexibility as a group. Slyfox made a few special arrangements, then ordered the entire company to begin to move.

Woola was given a very important task. They were going to depend on his sense of smell to find the various rat packs, while the mercenaries would then bait the ones they found into traps and wipe them out in batches.

By the end of the day, they had slain over a hundred of the giant rats. The total value of that much rat meat alone was quite significant. As for the mercenaries, they had suffered no casualties at all. This was an absolutely dazzling achievement!

They continued with the program the next day. However, Cloudhawk noticed that the number of giant rats in the area had noticeably lessened. By nightfall, they had only killed around fifty of the giant rats… and by the third day, there were virtually no giant rats to be found anywhere.

The mercenaries were all rather puzzled. Still, they didn’t spend too much time

pondering this. Most likely, these giant rats were territorial in nature. After they wiped out all the giant rats in one area, the giant rats in the other areas wouldn't immediately come pouring in, resulting in an empty region for a period of time. This actually wasn't that uncommon in the wastelands. Since they had already wiped out the giant rats in this area, the mercenaries decided that they would begin to slowly wipe out the rats in the surrounding areas as well.

"Woola!" Cloudhawk had Woola on the leash. Woola was running up ahead while the twenty-plus mercenaries were moving through the exposed parts of the wastelands. Woola spent more than an hour running forwards before he suddenly came to a halt in front of a valley, then began to bray and bark towards it.

"There's a small group of giant rats up ahead." Cloudhawk wore a pair of protective goggles and had swathed his face in cloth. His shotgun was on his back, his staff was in his right hand, and he was dressed in leather armor; he rather looked like a proper mercenary right now. "There are roughly twenty to thirty of them."

Mad Dog didn't even hesitate. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's go in and wipe'm out!"

Cloudhawk gave the gorge another glance. It looked very dark and narrow. For some reason, he had a bad feeling about this place. "Something feels off."

Mad Dog didn't understand what Cloudhawk was saying. "Woola's sense of smell is never wrong!"

"The four of you, wait here. Report back immediately if something happens." Slyfox also trusted Woola's judgment, but his cautious nature led him to leave behind four mercenaries to stand guard. "We'll go in and deal with them as quickly as we can." Twenty or thirty giant rats were nothing to this group of crack mercenaries.

This gorge was extremely dark, narrow, and deep. As Cloudhawk followed the mercenaries in, the bad feeling in his heart only grew stronger and stronger. He had the nagging feeling that something was wrong, but was unable to put his finger on it.

Finally, they reached the deepest depths of the gorge.

"What the hell is going on?" Mad Dog stared at the empty gorge, his hideous black face twisting into a scowl. "Did Woola really fuck up?"

The region was completely empty. The ground was covered in rubble, and there was nowhere else to go. Not a single giant rat was to be seen everywhere. This made no sense!

Cloudhawk suddenly saw something in front of him. He immediately charged forwards, using his staff to bash aside a few rocks. When he saw what lay hidden underneath the rocks, his face instantly turned white.

The other mercenaries crowded around to take a look. When they saw it, strange looks appeared on their faces as well… because a large pile of rat hair and rat dung could be seen beneath the rocks. Woola's nose had been functioning perfectly. These things had been left buried no more than a few hours ago at most.

Even Slyfox and Mad Dog stared jaws agape at this strange sight. Cooke, however, didn't seem to understand the gravity of the situation. The burly mercenary actually began to roar with laughter: "Are you shitting me? Don't tell me that these giant rats set a trap for us, that they schemed to trick us into this place? Ahahaha…"

But just a heartbeat later, he stopped laughing… because he realized that no one else was laughing with him. He felt quite awkward!

Cloudhawk wasn't amused in the slightest. Instead, he felt a cold chill go down his spine. Although he had experienced countless terrors during the past two months, this time was different. A strange, terrifying thought was floating through his mind…

Did these damn rats really set up a trap… and succeed in tricking humans into falling for it?!

Chapter 41
In the Face of Death

Cloudhawk's thoughts were slowly being consumed by this terrifying possibility. Had the giant rats been spying on the mercenaries during the past few days? Had they first gotten a handle on how the mercenaries were behaving, then set a special trap to wipe them all out in one go?

Impossible. He had to be imagining things. This idea was shocking, ridiculous, impossible, and unbelievable. But when Cloudhawk took another glance at the rat hair, then at the local geography, he couldn't help but turn even paler. The only way the little bastards could've set up a trap like this was if they were almost as intelligent as human beings!

Giant rats were amongst the lowest type of mutabeasts in existence. In both the Old Times and in the modern era, they were at the very bottom of the food chain. Cloudhawk refused to believe that rats could come up with a scheme like this. This entire world has gone mad!

The unsteady look on Slyfox's face suggested that he had the same thoughts as Cloudhawk, even though neither voiced them. Still, Slyfox was a very experienced man who had encountered many dangerous events in his life. He didn't hesitate in the slightest as he immediately called out, "Withdraw!"

Everyone came back to their senses. Right at this moment, a series of noises could be heard from the entrance to the valley. A pair of gunshots could be heard, followed by miserable screams. The mercenaries stationed outside were in trouble!

Mad Dog immediately ordered, "Cooke, Woola, go take a look!" Woola was the fastest member of the mercenary squad, his six legs allowing him to bound forward with the speed of a cyclone. Right behind him were eight wastelander cavalrymen riding their bigfoot birds, with the other mercenaries frantically running towards the entrance to the gorge.

That uneasy feeling in Cloudhawk's mind grew stronger and stronger. Something really bad was going to happen!

Just a few minutes later, Woola came bounding backwards. His body was covered with wounds, and only six of the eight mercenary cavalry came back, with Cooke supporting an injured one. The injured cavalryman's chest was torn apart with bite marks, and it looked as though they had chewed their way into his innards. The most deadly wound was the one on his neck, where it looked as though his carotid artery had been severed.

"I need a medic!"

Several mercenaries frantically ran over, wanting to help, but the man's injuries were catastrophic. There was no way to stop the bleeding, and blood continued to spew out of him. He struggled to open his eyes, then reached out with a mangled hand to weakly clasp a nearby mercenary. He summoned all of the energy he had to say: "We're completely surrounded outside. I'm not gonna make it. Leave me and… get the hell… out of…"

Right at this moment, a tidal wave of strange squeaks suddenly rang out from outside. These were the sounds the giant rats made… and it seemed as though there were countless rats right outside! The mercenaries all felt as though they had been doused in cold water as the final strand of hope they had felt was extinguished!

"What the hell is going on?" The furious Mad Dog charged straight towards Cooke, grabbing him roughly. "Where are the others? What happened to the others?!"

Cooke just shook his head, a bitter look on his face. Just as Mad Dog was about to launch into an enraged tirade, the worst case scenario happened.

A large number of giant rats began to flood into the gorge, surging towards them like a tide. Some were burrowing under the ground while some were crawling on the walls. There had to be at least five or six hundred of the critters at a minimum!

Damn. This is almost as bad as a beast wave! Although the mercenaries were quite powerful, how could they possibly deal with such a large-scale attack by so many giant rats? The mercenaries began to withdraw, not even thinking about stopping to fight. Slyfox moved to grab the heavily injured cavalryman, only to discover that he had already passed away just a short while ago.

The countless giant rats around them continued to surge closer and closer towards them.

“Screw it, withdraw!”

“Withdraw!”

“Withdraw!”

The twenty-plus mercenaries all began to frantically retreat. While withdrawing, Cloudhawk stared wide-eyed as the dead mercenary on the ground was dragged like a ragdoll into an entire pack of savage giant rats. It was like he had been dragged into the hands of a horde of murderous children, and just a few seconds later the corpse had been completely torn apart.

Cloudhawk had spent roughly a month and a half at Blackflag Outpost. By now, he knew and was very familiar with every single mercenary in the Tartarus mercenary company. They loved to tease and torment him… and now, one of them had just died in front of Cloudhawk, with his body torn into shreds. Cloudhawk couldn’t help but feel miserable. Although he still really didn’t like Blackflag Outpost, he had to admit that he truly had become a member of the mercenary company.

One of his comrades had just died in front of him, and there hadn’t been a thing he could do about it. This induced a sensation of rage and grief as he powerlessly tightened his grasp around the black tri-bladed staff!

Cloudhawk’s eyes were completely bloodshot by now. Right at this moment, one of the dog-sized giant rats pounced straight towards him, its mutated claws and fangs as sharp as knives. These creatures were incredibly deadly; if he allowed himself to be knocked down, he would be doomed.

Cloudhawk lashed out with his staff, and the blood-splattered giant rat came crashing down to the ground. Alas, the creature was incredibly tough and tenacious. Although it had been heavily injured, it didn’t retreat; instead, it moved to attack in an even more berserk fashion. Right at this moment, two more giant rats appeared next to Cloudhawk. They were as agile as panthers and as savage as wolves, launching a pincer attack on Cloudhawk.

“Fuck off!” Cloudhawk brandished his tri-blade staff, managing to just barely beat back two of the rats. The third one managed to make it past his defenses, leaping onto Cloudhawk and pouncing onto him, using its hooked claws to dig an enormous tear on the back of Cloudhawk’s leather armor.

Cloudhawk spun his tri-blade staff backwards, using it to stab towards his own back! Several bloody wounds appeared on the giant rat's body, but it continued to obstinately maintain its grip on Cloudhawk. It even attempted to climb upwards and tear at Cloudhawk's neck! Right at this critical moment, the six-armed Woola came charging over. Woola grabbed the giant rat, threw it to the ground, then delivered a crushing bite to the giant rat's head.

"Let's run, Woola!" Cloudhawk stabbed to death a giant rat which sought to ambush Woola. The creature's foul, pungent blood spurted onto his face, but he didn't even have any time to wipe it off. They were completely surrounded by giant rats, all of which were leaping towards them.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Three cracks rang out as Slyfox turned to fire off three shots in their direction. Three of the giant rats toppled to the ground. Cloudhawk and Woola hurriedly took advantage of the opening to follow after the rest of the mercenaries.

"Don't panic, rookies! Don't panic! All of you, stay close to me!" Slyfox fired repeated long-distance shots, killing several of the deadly acid rats which were hidden amongst the many other giant rats. "Cooke's up ahead searching for a place for us to hide!"

Mad Dog was like a windmill meat grinder, swinging his snow-white machetes in every direction as he hacked open a path for the others. It didn't matter how ferocious the giants rat were or how many of them attacked; all of them were hacked into mincemeat by Mad Dog's deadly dance of machetes.

Several of the wastelander cavalry on the bigfoot birds led the vanguard in their breakout attempt. Cooke led them through various twists and turns, somehow actually managing to discover a cave.

"There's a cave up ahead!"

"Quick, into the cave!"

The mercenaries fought their way all the way to the cave entrance. The cave was large enough for the mercenaries to hide themselves in. If they barricaded themselves inside and just defended the entrance, their chances for survival would be exponentially higher!

Just as the mercenaries were about to go into the cave, five particularly muscular giant rats came flying out from inside the cave. The vermin had actually set up a small

ambush for them! However, there weren't enough of the rats to actually pose a danger to the mercenaries.

"GRAAAH!" Mad Dog was like a maddened beast as he hacked all of the nearby giant rats into tiny pieces. Just as Mad Dog chopped the final giant rat apart, one final rat came bounding towards them from within the darkness. Without even pausing to think, Mad Dog moved to chop this rat apart as well.

Slyfox's eyes widened as he stared at the giant rat from afar. He let out a loud roar, "Blast rat! Dodge it!"

This giant rat was smaller than most giant rats, but its fur was completely red. Under ordinary lighting, it would've stood out quite easily. Much like the acid rats, blast rats were a special type of mutant rats. They weren't large, but their bodies contained an enormous amount of explosive materials inside. If it suddenly exploded, not only would Mad Dog and the surrounding mercenaries be caught in the blast, even the very cave itself would be collapsed.

Without the protection of the cave, the mercenaries would be doomed! They'd be swamped and torn to bits by this endless wave of giant rats!

Doomed. We're doomed. It's too late! But right at this critical moment, an incredibly agile black shadow shot forwards, using its mouth to bite down on the blast rat. The black shadow's six arms propelled it outwards at incredible speeds as it instantly charge outside of the cave.

Cloudhawk shouted loudly, "Danger! Get back here!"

Woola shook his powerful head, sending the blast rat flying into the air… but it suddenly detonated just a second later. The rat had flown less than two meters away before exploding, and it was like a grenade had detonated. An enormous ball of light and fire burst out with terrible power, blasting a crater into the ground. As for Woola, he was blown backwards by the force of the collision and knocked sprawling to the ground. His six arms twitched spasmodically, but he was unable to clamber back to his feet. Clearly, this wound was an extremely heavy one!

"Woola!" Cloudhawk's eyes instantly reddened. Cooke hurriedly moved forwards to grab him and stop him from moving. "Don't be rash!" Unexpectedly, Cloudhawk was so strong that Cooke wasn't able to grab a hold of him. Cloudhawk ran forwards in a

near-hysterical manner, his steel staff knocking aside five giant rats that were about to attack Woola. Several of the giant rats had torn multiple gaping wounds in his body. By now, the ten-plus nearby giant rats had already completely focused their attention upon him and Woola.

Slyfox raised his guns up high. The sound of gunfire rang out unabated, causing one giant rat after another to fall down. Alas, more of the giant rats quickly charged forwards to surround Cloudhawk once more. The sound of gunfire and bowstrings twanging could be heard. Thanks to the screening fire provided by the mercenaries, Cloudhawk finally managed to drag Woola back into the cave, his own body now covered with wounds.

Slyfox roared angrily towards Cloudhawk, "Are you mad? That was suicidal!"

Cloudhawk turned to glare right back at Slyfox, his eyes still crimson. "I had to save Woola!"

Even Slyfox was stunned by what he saw in Cloudhawk's eyes. However, he quickly recovered. "Mad Dog, block them at the entranceway. Everyone else, help out!"

Everyone frantically ran over to inspect Woola and see if they could treat his wounds… and their faces quickly turned grim. Woola's injuries were absolutely grievous!

Woola's head had suffered the brunt of the explosion, and half of his face was missing. One of his eyes was gone, as were two of his legs. They could even see his open, exposed skull! Woola was furiously panting for breath, but it was clear that he was at the verge of death.

The mercenaries had raised Woola since he was young. He was a human, but was so highly mutated that there was no difference between him and a wild animal. They normally treated him as nothing more than a guard dog, but in their hearts Woola was an inseparable member of the Tartarus mercenaries.

Woola was an ugly, savage, bloodthirsty cannibal… but when the mercenaries were in danger, he had ignored his own safety and charged out to protect them. He had traded away his own life to give them a chance to live. He was nothing more than a wild animal, but he was far better than many 'humans' of this day and age!

Cloudhawk wanted to help Woola, but had no idea as to what he could do. "Hang on, Woola! Where's the medicine? I need medicine! We need to treat Woola!" But the only

response was silence.

The mercenaries sighed silently. As for Woola, he opened his remaining eye and let out a low, mournful gurgle.

Right at this moment, Slyfox walked over to Cloudhawk, then pulled out a dagger and tossed it to him.

Cloudhawk stared at Slyfox in disbelief, then glanced at Woola. “What are you saying?”

“Woola’s in a lot of pain right now.” Slyfox’s own pudgy face was also covered in grief. “He viewed you as a friend… which is why we’re gonna let you send’m on the final leg of his journey.”

Send him on his final journey? Cloudhawk dumbly accepted the dagger, then turned to look at the horrifically wounded Woola. Woola stared at Cloudhawk with his one good eye, a look of grief and agony in his gaze.

“Woola wants to keep livin’, but he can’t live much longer. There’s no place in the wastelands that can treat injuries like this… and even if he did by some miracle manage to survive, the only thing waiting for him would be a life as a cripple. You know exactly what that sort of life would be!” A heavy look on his face, Slyfox explained to Cloudhawk, “As a man, ya gotta make sure you live up to the trust your battle-brothers place in you. This is Woola’s final wish, and a chance for us to relieve’m of his pain.”

Woola was beyond rescue. Cloudhawk knew this… he just couldn’t accept it. The powerful vital energy which made this mutant so strong was now a curse that was trapping him in a cage of agony, preventing him from dying. The one and only thing they could do for him was to relieve him of his pain.

But… Woola saved my life! How can I kill him?

Slyfox said heavily, “You grew up in the wastelands. By now, you should’ve learned to look death straight in the face. This is something every wastelander has to learn and experience. It is a crazy world we live in. Stayin’ alive aint always a good thing, and dying can be a form of release. D’ya unnerstand what I’m sayin’? Don’t waste any more time. Woola’s in a lotta pain right now!”

Cloudhawk was silent for a few seconds as he waged a mental war against himself, then slowly lifted the dagger up. He murmured softly, “Farewell, Woola. Make sure you

aren't reborn into the wastelands in your next life."

As the dagger descended, Woola opened his remaining eye one final time. The only look in his eyes was that of gratitude.

Chapter 42
A Mans Choice

By now, Mad Dog had already hacked countless giant rats to pieces at the entrance of the cave. He was so soaked in gore that he looked as though he had been dragged out of a lake of blood, with bits and pieces of flesh plastering his entire body. It was impossible to tell how much of it was his and how much of it belonged to the giant rats.

These terrifying mutabeasts were individually much weaker than the rotwolves, but they were actually even more savage and suicidally bloodthirsty.

Slyfox patted Cloudhawk on the shoulders, then called out to the nearby mercenaries, “Help out!” No matter how powerful he was, Mad Dog was close to spent. The giant rat blood was both poisonous and bacteria-laden, and Mad Dog’s entire body was covered with both wounds and rat blood. He was already in very bad shape. Once he fell, the rest of the mercenaries would be in trouble!

Cloudhawk picked up his shotgun, then followed the other mercenaries as they charged towards the cave entrance. He seemed to let his fury explode alongside the shells of the shotgun, firing blasts that instantly knocked down multiple attacking giant rats.

Suddenly, there was a shift within the ranks of the rat swarm. Multiple green-furred acid rats and red-furred blast rats began to stealthily advance. Once these dangerous and highly mutated rats reached the entrance of the cave, they would inflect grievous injuries upon the mercenaries. These creatures were the bane of all close-combat fighters. No matter what, they couldn’t let them get closer to Mad Dog!

Slyfox didn’t waste a single bullet. Each shot came out with perfect accuracy and struck one of the special mutant rats dead-center, ensuring that they were disposed of safely and outside the ‘critical zone’. The battle around the entrance grew increasingly frenzied, with blood and gore splashing everywhere. Rat corpses were piling up into miniature hills, and there was a literal river of foul blood flowing out!

They had to have killed at least sixty or seventy of those giant rats. This was an

absolute slaughterhouse, an unprecedentedly calamitous wastelands battle!

The mercenaries had suffered extremely heavy casualties, and their total combat power was slowly falling. Slyfox didn't have many bullets left either. The worst part was, more and more giant rats continued to replenish the ranks of the fallen. From start to finish, their numbers had not diminished in the slightest!

The swarm of giant rats was like an endless sea of chattering darkness. The mercenaries did their best to fend them off and stay alive, but were like a tiny boat that was constantly at risk of being capsized by the stormy waves of the sea.

Slyfox's twin customized pistols continued to spit furious death, but this was of almost no deterrence to the fearless dire rats and the vermin continued to swarm forwards. By now, Slyfox only had a single ammo clip left, while Mad Dog had suffered more than fifteen wounds. Even though he was an incredibly powerful metahuman, he was at the brink of collapse.

As for Cloudhawk, he had long ago thrown away his shotgun. He held his tri-bladed staff in a double-handed grip and used it to continue the fight.

By now, eighty or ninety dire rats had perished. The mercenary ranks were beginning to shrink as their casualties mounted as well.

"Ahhh!" A bloody hole was torn into one of the vanguard mercenaries by the fangs of a giant rat. Slyfox hurriedly shot dead the offending rat, but even more giant rats swarmed the injured mercenary before the others had a chance to pull him out. He collapsed as his legs were torn to pieces, leaving behind virtually nothing besides his leg-bones. The mercenary did his best to clamber into the cave on his hands, but the giant rats dragged him backwards, his fingers leaving bloody marks on the cave floor. In the end, he disappeared into that endless sea of darkness.

"DAMNIT!" The enraged mercenaries redoubled their efforts against the rats.

The battle had already devolved into a war of attrition, a bloody fight where either side would win only a pyrrhic victory at best. It was clear, however, that the rats were present in such great numbers that they would be able to crush the mercenaries in the end. If this continued, it would only be a matter of time before the humans faced their doom.

However… right at this moment, something completely unexpected happened. A shrill

squeak rang out from within the rat swarm. The squeak was loud and incredibly sharp, boring straight into the ears of every single person and carrying with it an aura of majesty and dignity. It was as though the swarm had received orders from its king, as all of the rats instantly halted their attacks and retreated a few dozen paces.

The rat swarm suddenly parted, and a giant rat that looked very different from the rest emerged from within. Its fur was completely white and slick, almost silken. It was able to both crawl around on all fours as well as walk upright on its hind legs. It was triple the size of an ordinary giant rat, almost on par with an ordinary human.

A certain distance separated the two sides. The giant silver rat stood up straight on its high legs, then swept the humans with its beady black gaze. Every single human present could sense what that gaze held: intelligence, cruelty, remorselessness, and cold hate.

Animals shouldn't have gazes like that… and they shouldn't look like that either! Judging from its head, its eyes, its nose, its ears, its mouth, and its knife-sharp claws, it looked just like an ordinary rat… but its gaze, demeanor, and posture marked it as human!

The rat king! This had to be the rat king! Even the most fearless of mercenaries who had often ventured into the wastelands, when faced with this strange creature, felt a sense of terror slowly seep deep into their very bones.

The rat king stared at the stunned, exhausted, and heavily wounded mercenaries… then its sharp mouth slowly hooked upwards, almost in a mocking smile.

Was it a smile? Perhaps it was. Perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps the rat king didn't really know what this expression signified, and perhaps it was just an automatic reflex on its part… but the effect was striking and bizarre.

None of the humans present would ever be able to forget this sight. They felt stunned, shocked, horrified… and most of all, they felt disbelief! By now Cloudhawk had seen many terrifying sights, but none of them could hold a candle to what he saw in front of him right now.

Finally, the mercenaries understood why they were in such terrible shape. This mutant rat king their employer was interested in… it clearly was an intelligent ratling!

Although they had already thought of this possibility once they had been trapped and

ambushed, for it to actually become real before their very eyes was something else entirely. Both rookies like Cloudhawk and experienced figures like Mad Dog and Slyfox all stared in disbelief at the rat king.

Hell, who would accept this? This world really had gone mad. Otherwise, how could even rats have evolved to gain human-like intelligence?

Slyfox was filled with bitter regret. If he had known what a freak this rat king was, he never would've dared to accept this mission no matter how bold or greedy he was. This completely overturned his worldview and surpassed his imagination!

The rat king had been commanding its army to attack, but had suffered extremely heavy casualties due to these humans being much stronger than expected. Although the rats had more than enough numbers to drown these humans under their weight, they would probably be forced to pay a calamitous price in doing so. As a result… the rat king wanted to use a different method to deal with these humans.

The rat king stared at the mercenaries in that callous, weighing manner, almost as though it was looking at a flopping fish on the chopping block. The mercenaries couldn't help but feel a sense of fear and dread.

CRACK! Suddenly, without any warning, Slyfox fired his pistol!

The dire rats were under the control of the rat king. So long as he was able to kill the rat king, the dire rats would have lost their commander and would fall into a state of chaos. At that time, the mercenaries would have a chance to escape. This was what Slyfox was thinking… but as soon as he fired his pistol, the rat king dodged aside with shadowy grace.

A different dire rat perished instead, its head exploding into tiny pieces. The other dire rats seemed to be enraged by this and immediately began to grow restless, as though they were about to once more initiate their swarming attacks. The rat king, however, charged forwards and tore apart two of the more disobedient rats while continuously squeaking warnings at the others. Only then did the restless swarm once more grow calm.

The rat king's shrill squeaks seemed to carry more than ten different types of sounds and tones. This virtually fulfilled all the prerequisites necessary for something to be classified as a language!

Speaking and writing; these were the seeds of any civilization! In other words… if given enough time and numbers, these creatures might propagate into a new and intelligent race. The very thought of such a thing brought shivers down the spines of the men present!

The rat king was extremely cautious. It had spent a very long period of time inspecting the mercenaries, and by now knew just how powerful each mercenary was. There was no way Slyfox would be able to hit it… and if even Slyfox was unable to hit it, the other mercenaries could forget about even trying.

Cloudhawk stared at the endless masses of dire rats, his heart filled with utter despair. They had no chance at all! Mad Dog was heavily wounded and exhausted, while Slyfox was almost out of bullets. Under the guidance of the rat king, the rat swarm could simply choose to keep them surrounded and starve them out. After two or three days without access to food or water, the mercenaries would collapse without the rats needing to lift a claw!

The rat king suddenly ordered the giant rats to split apart. The hundreds of dire rats continued to keep the cave entrance surrounded, but they left a wide empty space at the very center.

The mercenaries looked at each other. What was this all about? Was the rat trying to lure them out and then surround them? They weren't fools!

But right at this moment, the rat king suddenly crouched downwards and scuttled forwards, all four limbs on the ground. It looked almost like a cat as it stared warily at the humans. Slyfox wanted to fire upon it on multiple occasions, but every time his fingers so much as twitched the rat king would move slightly in response. He simply didn't feel any confidence in being able to hit the rat king!

"The freak has come out on its own!" Cloudhawk immediately said, "This is a good opportunity. Lets charge out and kill it!"

Yeah, not gonna be that easy to kill the rat king, kid. Everyone knew that it was obviously a trap! Slyfox shook his head. "Don't be rash. Let's see what it wants to do!"

After moving closer to the humans, the rat king suddenly stood up on its two hind legs… and then it did something which completely flummoxed all of the humans. It raised an arm… extended a finger… and then pointed it at one of the mercenaries. The

rat king let out a few ear-piercing screeches that were filled with mockery and disdain!

Was it… was it challenging the mercenaries to one-on-one duels?

The mercenary the rat king was pointing at was Cooke. Cooke was still in fairly decent shape right now; he wasn't nearly as injured or as exhausted as Mad Dog. He was also incredibly burly and muscular, and so he was quite prominent amongst the mercenary ranks.

"Fucking rat." After being dazed for a brief moment, Cooke began to curse as though he had just suffered the greatest of insults. "Fuck! You wanna solo? Let's solo, you little fucker! Do you think I'm actually scared of you?"

"Don't take the risk!" Slyfox immediately moved to stop Cooke. "We aint got any idea as to how tough it is!"

Cooke gave Slyfox a hard look, the meaning in his eyes clear. "Boss, this is our only shot."

Slyfox still refused to agree. "Nuh-uh. Too risky!"

Cooke argued, "We only have a chance to kill it if we fight it in close combat. All of the rats here are under its command. If we can kill it, we'll have a shot at survival!"

His words made sense. The mercenaries had no chance at breaking out by force. Their only shot was to kill this rat king… but this 'duel' entailed an enormous amount of risk! Was Cooke really a match for the rat king?

Mad Dog was sitting off to one side, panting raggedly. "Even if you kill it, you won't be coming back either. You know that, right?"

They were completely surrounded by giant rats, and the duel would take place within their ranks. Even if Cooke really did kill the rat king, the other giant rats would immediately descend into a state of chaos and swarm him. There would be virtually no chance for him to escape.

"Hah! No shit." Cooke let out a fearless laugh, a relaxed, sincere look in his eyes. There was no hesitation or fear in his gaze at all.

"Slyfox… Mad Dog… If the two of you hadn't rescued me from those slave traders all

those years ago, I probably would've ended up dead and buried under some rock in the wastelands by now. Thanks for taking such good care of me for so long. We're all men, so I'm not gonna get all emo on you with some fancy-arsed speech. Hell, I'd blush if I did. Just lemme go and don't try to stop me!"

The mercenaries all fell silent, while Mad Dog and Slyfox exchanged a glance. Finally, Slyfox let out a long sigh.

"It's not your job to die for us. You can't go!" Cloudhawk shot to his feet in opposition. "Chances are that none of us are going to survive. Let's just fight together and die together!"

"Listen up, newbie. We haven't known each other for all that long, but I can tell that you're a pretty decent kid. Problem is, you're still too young… but I'm sure that if you survive this rite of passage, you'll eventually grow up to become a real man!"

Cooke's enormous, tall, and muscular figure made the skinny Cloudhawk look even smaller in comparison. He clapped Cloudhawk on the shoulders, then let out a loud laugh. The burly wastelander picked up a pair of axes, his armor so caked in blood that it looked as though it had been dyed a new color. He strode forwards firmly and without hesitation. He didn't look like he was walking forwards to his death; he looked as though he was walking out onto the most important stage of his life.

"When that happens? You'll understand the choice I'm making today."

Chapter 43
Rage

Right now, the mercenaries had almost no chance of surviving this. The sole, slim chance they had lay in killing the rat king… but Cooke faced suicidal levels of danger in choosing to confront it. Even if he really did kill the rat king, the rat swarm would launch an immediate attack. They wouldn't have any chance to save him.

But… there were no other choices to be made. This was the only shot they had.

Cooke strode forwards, an axe in each hand. These battleaxes were custom-made mercenary weapons. Each axe was roughly two feet long and extremely heavy. Each axe-blade was shaped like a half-moon, and both axes were stained with black blood that continued to slowly drip down towards the ground.

Just as Cooke reached the center, the rat king issued an order to the dire rats, having them surround Cooke while giving him enough free space. In this way, they would be able to prevent the other mercenaries from launching sneak attacks or ambushes mid-battle.

The damn creature did at least honor its word. It had offered a duel, and a duel this would be. It didn't simply wish to trick the mercenaries into coming out, then murdering them. What was truly amazing, however, was the fact that the dire rats were nothing more than ordinary mutated rats. Somehow, the rat king had managed to train these dumb creatures into an army that it could command at will. This was no easy or ordinary feat!

The rat king landed on the ground on all fours, adopting a vigilant battle-posture. Its sleek, silver-white fur served as a form of natural leather armor. Its four paws were unable to hold weapons or manipulate firearms, but the four claws on each paw served as exceptional weapons. It rubbed eight of those claws together as it let out an ear-piercing screech.

Cooke stared at the rat king. The rat king stared right back at Cooke.

The rat king's black eyes were unfathomably deep, but a look of hatred could be seen

to slowly appear within it. The rat king had been born in a wastelands laboratory. That bloody, cruel place had been filled with hundreds of mutabeasts, and the rat king had been the cleverest specimen there. Thus, at a very young age it had learned quite a few things from the humans who had operated that laboratory. Although it was unable to actually produce human sounds, it was able to partially understand human speech.

It understood humans, and it hated humans. Every single human was worthy of death! Waves of a murderous aura began to spread out from the rat king.

Cooke was the first to move. He instantly let out a lion-like roar, causing the surrounding dire rats to twitch in surprise, then shot out with incomprehensible speed like a battering ram towards the rat king. His aura and his power was such that a person standing in front of him would feel as though a mountain was smashing towards him!

He was one of the oldest members of the Tartarus mercenaries. There was a significant difference in power between Cooke and the company captains, but he was definitely an elite amongst elites when compared to the ordinary mercenaries. He was a classic example of a strength metahuman, but the tremendous amount of power his muscles could release allowed him to move and fight in close combat with nearly as much speed as an agility metahuman.

His two axes were filled with explosive power as they furiously chopped out in two beautiful arcs towards the rat king! If this blow landed against the rat king, it wouldn't matter how tough the rat king's fur was; not even iron armor could withstand such a strike. The rat king would definitely be cleaved in twain.

Unfortunately, he was too slow! The rat king's hind legs flexed, sending it dodging three feet back and perfectly avoiding the axe-chops.

Cooke, however, seemed to have anticipated this. Just as the axe in his left hand descended and missed the rat king, he suddenly leapt three meters into the air off his right leg, then hacked down with his other axe with the speed of a thunderbolt!

The first chop was vertical while the second was horizontal. The two strikes were perfectly linked together and part of one smooth motion. In both speed and power, this double-strike was simply supreme.

Boom! The ground itself seemed to shake! The thick and heavy axes carved out deep

gouges into the earth, while the rat king retreated by another few feet. It was simply far too fast, and Cooke's furious strikes all completely missed it.

Before the rat king had a chance to find its footing, Cooke once more hurtled towards him while kicking up a storm of sand. Cooke's twin axes danced in the air like a pair of vipers, spinning like a pair of deadly windmills as he repeatedly struck out against the rat king.

Ever since Cooke had entered this 'arena', he had discarded all hope of surviving. He was determined to die, and so he completely focused on attacking while holding nothing back. This sort of suicidal, kamikaze attack would cause even fighters who were significantly stronger than him to be discomfited. Duels between experts could be decided in a single instant. If one side was nervous and afraid of dying while the other had already accepted death, there would obviously be a significant difference in morale which would have an impact on how well each performed!

The rat king's pitch-black eyes suddenly gleamed with savage light as it came to a sudden halt, lifting up its paws to block.

Clang! Clang! The windmill attacks suddenly came to an end as the two axes came crashing down against the eight sharp claws of the rat king. The terrifying power of the blows kicked up a cloud of dust. The man and the rat stood there, the rat king having elected to use this type of strike to defend against the enemy's attacks. Both sides began to exert as much strength as they could, and for a time they were evenly matched.

The mercenaries were all shocked to see this. They could tell from this brief moment of combat that the rat king was vastly faster than Cooke, and a close match for him in raw strength as well. The difference in ability between the two was quite apparent. The rat king wasn't just the 'political' leader of these giant rats, it was also the most powerful member of the race!

Cooke roared angrily as he once again chopped out with his axe against the rat king's head, but he hit nothing but shadows. The rat king, after dodging his attack, struck out with a set of claws and tore a bone-deep wound into Cooke's chest. Cooke endured the pain, turning to deliver a counter-attack when the rat king once more shot straight past him. The creature was simply too fast!

Cooke fell down to one knee, an enormous wound having been torn into his upper

thighs. He continued to howl angrily as he brandished his hatchet, while the rat king landed on the ground and then immediately leaping towards Cooke once more.

This time, Cooke let out a blood-curdling scream. Three of his fingers had been cut off, and they went flying away along with the axe they had been gripping. The axe flew more than ten meters away before it crashed to the ground.

Not good! Cloudhawk's heart clenched.

Cooke continued to press the attack with his right hand, while the rat king didn't let up in the slightest. With the next strike, it tore open Cooke's chest. Cooke no longer had the strength to lift up the axe, and it slipped out of his grasp and thudded down to the ground.

He had lost. He had completely lost. He had never imagined that the difference in power between them would be as great as this!

The rat king still didn't pause in the slightest, continuously dashing past him and raking bloody wounds in Cooke with its claws each time. In just ten or so seconds, Cooke's entire body was covered with bloody wounds. The rat king did not, however, aim any attacks at Cooke's vital points.

It wasn't intending to kill Cooke. It was torturing him instead, causing Cooke to let out one agonized and enraged howl after another.

This sight thoroughly enraged all of the mercenaries, and their eyes spat hatred towards the rat king. In a duel, it was normal for the victor to live and the loser to die; this was true in both the wastelands and in the outposts. But… the rat king's true purpose clearly wasn't to challenge the humans. The real reason it had chosen to fight a duel against a human was to instigate and enrage the other humans and thus cause them to voluntarily charge out of the cave and be entrapped by the endless waves of rats.

Damn this creature. It actually understood psychology and manipulation!

"Graaaah! Damn you!" Cooke was covered in dozens of giant, bloody wounds. His body had been converted into a mishmash of blood and gore, almost as though a butcher had gone to work on him with a cleaver. He could also tell what the rat king's intentions were, and he howled in rage and grief, "Go ahead and kill me, you sackless sonufabitch! Kill me if you have any balls!"

How could Cloudhawk accept this? How could he possibly withstand this type of torment? How could he ever be able to endure this type of humiliation?

A wild animal was tormenting and torturing one of his brothers, right in front of him. Was he supposed to just sit there and watch without actually doing anything, to just stick his head in the sand and pretend that nothing was wrong? And in truth, Cloudhawk wasn't the only one enraged. Mad Dog had an even worse temper, and it exploded when Mad Dog saw what was going on.

"Attack them! Wipe these motherfuckers out!"

"Boss! Boss! Don't go!" Five mercenaries had to work together to hold Mad Dog back. Tears shone in their eyes as they called out, "It's a trick! Don't fall for the bastard's trick!"

Mad Dog bellowed, "I don't give a flying fuck if it's a trick or not! Let go of me!"

Cloudhawk shared the same rage and grief the other mercenaries felt! This was a grim, callous, and preposterous era they were living in. In times like this, trust and faith were more valuable than anything else. To the mercenaries, the Tartarus company was their home, and every single brother was a treasured family member!

A rat actually dared to torture one of their family members to death? Nobody would be able to endure such a sight… but right now, Cooke was in more agony than anyone else.

"Don't come out! Don't come out!" Cooke had been tormented to the point where he looked inhuman. He knelt there on the ground, looking like a butchered corpse, and blood mixed with tears on his face as he called out with agony, "Let me die! Let me die! LET ME DIE!"

Cooke wasn't just suffering mere physical agony; the humiliation and mental agony he was suffering was far greater than the fleshly pain. He wasn't afraid of death; if he was afraid of death, he never would've walked out to accept the duel. But he never imagined that his resolve would be used as a tool to manipulate his brothers.

At a time like this, to a valiant, tough-as-nails man like him, death was a form of release! He was a proud, intrepid wastelands warrior… but at the end of his life, he was now kneeling on the ground, screaming for death. His overconfidence, his resolve, his wish to protect his fellows… they had all transformed into endless torment and

humiliation.

Crack!

The utterly heartbroken Slyfox fired a shot, but the rat king seemed to have seen this coming. It immediately dragged Cooke into the rat swarm, and the countless rats immediately covered Cooke, making it impossible for the mercenaries to see him. The only thing left was Cooke's unending, miserable screams.

The screams were filled with resentment, shame, rage, and grief. Every single scream stabbed into Cloudhawk's heart like a dagger.

Cloudhawk's hands slowly curled into fists as he stared at the brutal scene before him. He could no longer hold back the furious rage that was building inside his breast. As the mercenaries were all focused on holding Mad Dog back, Cloudhawk immediately rose up and charged outside.

"HEY! What are you doing?!" Slyfox was stunned. "Stop him, quick!"

Cloudhawk had never been as furious as he was right now. He leapt forward with the speed and grace of a panther, giving the two nearby mercenaries no chance to catch up at all as he charged out of the cave. As soon as he did so, the rat swarm surged forwards to welcome him.

"FUCK OFF!" Cloudhawk let out an enraged bellow. The murderous aura emanating from him caused even the dire rats to pause momentarily. In this moment, they felt as though it wasn't a human in front of them; rather, it was an utterly enraged wastelands beast!

"I'll fight you! I want to fight you!" Cloudhawk lifted his tri-bladed staff up high, then pointed it directly at the rat king. "I know you can understand me. Come and fight me, if you dare!"

Rage, grief, shame, hate! Although the rat king didn't have the vocabulary necessary to express these things, he could keenly sense the presence of these emotions. It had spent more than ten years being tormented and experimented on by humans, and it had seen its parents and siblings die in front of it. It understood these feelings quite well.

It let out a shrill screech, and the rat swarm slowly began to retreat.

In truth, it could tell at a glance how strong or how weak the humans were. It could tell that Mad Dog was just as strong as it. Even though Mad Dog had already suffered heavy injuries, the cautious rat king wouldn't dare to challenge him to a battle. Cloudhawk, however, was clearly an underage and undersized youth; there was no need for the rat king to worry about him.

Cloudhawk held his black tri-bladed staff up high as he charged forwards, moving faster and faster as he sprinted towards the rat king so quickly he looked as though he was flying.

Right now, Cloudhawk only had a single thought in his mind:

Kill it!

Kill it!

Kill it!

Whether for Woola's sake or for Cooke's sake, or for the sake of the others… Cloudhawk had to kill it!

Chapter 44
Betrayed

Cloudhawk was a rookie who was taking part in a mission for the very first time. He was completely inexperienced, and he had never before battled against dangerous creatures like these. In front of him was a freak which even the experienced mercenaries had never seen before, and which was far crueler and more sadistic than any ordinary beasts. Not only was Cloudhawk not terrified… he actually went out to challenge the thing!

The kid has gone absolutely stark raving mad!

True, during the past two days Cloudhawk's performance in battle was far superior to what the mercenaries had predicted, but he still ranked at the very bottom in terms of ability. If even Cooke had been completely unable to fight back against this freak, how did the kid think he would stand a chance at all? This sort of behavior was absolutely suicidal!

"Slyfox, what the fuck are you afraid of?" Mad Dog actually knocked down two of the people in front of him. "Even the newest rookie has more balls than you, you spineless pussy! If we die, we die. Mad Dog aint no bitch!"

Slyfox stared at Cloudhawk as the kid charged out, then let out a long sigh. "Fine, then. Let's charge together!"

"We were waiting for you to say that!"

"Rookies! Follow my lead!"

The other mercenaries had been burning with the desire to do just that. Men, by their very nature, are filled with stubbornness and defiance. They weren't going to be able to escape today… so if they had to die, they were going to die with a bang! To die while hiding in a mountain cave like turtles hiding in their shells was far too fucking pathetic!

As soon as the mercenaries began to move, the rats began to move in unison as well.

The two sides instantly became locked in yet another bloody battle!

Cloudhawk focused all of his attention towards the opponent in front of him. When the rat king noticed how the mercenaries were attempting to surround it, it felt as though there was no need to waste time; it would first kill this small human, then wipe out the others! It leapt off the ground with its four paws, sending it straight forwards in a straight line charge.

Even though Cloudhawk's reactive instincts were better than Cooke's, the rat king was simply far too fast! There was no way Cloudhawk could dodge… and so he didn't. Instead, he barreled straight towards the rat king!

When the rat king was ten meters away from him, Cloudhawk's black tri-bladed staff began to vibrate slightly.

When the rat king was five meters away, it once more leapt off the ground towards Cloudhawk. It launched eight incredibly sharp claw-strikes straight at the puny human's critical organs. Its claws were like eight lethally sharp knives stabbing straight at Cloudhawk!

Here it comes… here it comes! Victory or defeat would be determined by this strike!

Ignoring everything else, Cloudhawk struck out with his exorcist staff! The tri-blades had already begun to spin frantically, reaching an incredible rotational velocity in an extremely short period of time. Cloudhawk had poured all of his energy and his very being into this strike. Sparks appeared from the dancing exorcist staff as it exploded with tempestuous might, generating streams of energy which caused the dirt and pebbles in the surrounding area to fly into the air.

"GO DIE!!!" Cloudhawk bellowed, pouring all of his rage and hatred into this strike. The rat king's eight claws, 'impervious' to normal weapons, were instantly shattered by the terrifying destructive force of Cloudhawk's strike. The shockwave generated by the clash was simply incredible, with the exorcist staff releasing its full, pent-up, tornado-like power onto the body of the rat king.

The rat king let out a miserable squeak as it was sent flying ten meters away. Its body actually fell apart into two pieces in midair. Blood splattered the ground as its two halves finally fell down.

The rats were all stunned. Even the mercenaries stared, stupefied.

The weakest-looking human had actually just unleashed a strike of incredible power. There was no way an ordinary person could possibly possess such strength. This power, this savagery… it defied all science and all common sense!

The rat king didn't instantly die. The upper half of its body was struggling in agony, seeming to want to reconnect with the other half. It wanted to stay alive. It didn't want to die! But its body had been completely torn apart, and its innards had been completely splattered. Even though the rat king didn't know exactly what was going on, it knew that it wasn't going to survive this.

The rat king turned its increasingly-blurry gaze towards the youth. The youth had unleashed all of his rage and hatred in that strike. Now, he simply stood there while panting and gulping.

So the brat succeeded. He gained revenge for his friend. But what about me? What about my vengeance? I haven't even found that damn madman! I haven't torn him apart, haven't ripped him from limb to limb!

These humans… they might view me as being 'evil', but in my eyes these arrogant and ignorant humans are the true definition of evil!

Why did you capture us? Torture us? Why did you barge into my territory? Why did you kill my children? You even skinned our dead and ate our flesh. You tore our bones out of our bodies!

Why? Why?! WHY!!!

The dying thought of this intelligent animal was that it suddenly envied its fellows. It truly wished that it was like them, incapable of rational thought or planning. If they were hungry, they ate. They survived on instinct alone. The rat king didn't want to die. It really didn't want to die!

The rat king let out one final terrified, agonized squeak… then everything went dark.

Now that the rat king had been slain, the dire rats instantly lost their cohesiveness. No longer under any control, the hundreds of dire rats entered a state of chaos. Some turned to flee, some ran back and forth, and a few continued to press the attack against the mercenaries.

Cloudhawk felt completely exhausted after having used his tri-blade staff to slay the

rat king. His head was woozy and his ears were deafened. He was barely even able to stay standing… and this was the moment that seven or eight dire rats surrounded and attacked him.

Cloudhawk was completely out of energy. He was able to feebly swing his staff a few times before the dire rats knocked him down with ease. Right at this moment, a machete flew past him and plunged deep into the body of a dire rat.

Mad Dog's muscular body was covered in blood. He had charged next to Cloudhawk, and with but a single chop he knocked that dire rat flying. He then pulled his machete back and growled, "Got any fight left?"

Cloudhawk struggled to nod.

"Good. We're gonna carve a path outta here!"

With the rat king's death, the rat swarms had lost their cohesiveness. The majority of the dire rats began to leave in various directions. Although a few hundred continued to surround and assault the mercenaries, they were now under much less pressure than during the previous battle. Despite that… it was still a brutal fight.

The mercenaries were completely spent, and all of them were covered in wounds. They had to battle for over ten more minutes before the dire rats finally and fully retreated.

Six more mercenaries had died during that last battle, leaving just twelve of them alive. This mission had caused the Tartarus mercenaries to suffer catastrophic losses. They had lost half of their combat power… but thankfully, the other half had made it out alive. Otherwise, the Tartarus mercenaries would've been a mercenary company in the hells of Tartarus.

Mad Dog turned to stare at Cloudhawk as if the latter was a freak. "How the hell did you do that earlier?"

Cloudhawk knew that there was no way he would be able to hide this any longer. He briefly told the mercenaries part of the story regarding the Bloodsoaked Queen and the exorcist staff. All of the mercenaries were stunned by what they heard. None of them had imagined that Cloudhawk was someone who was capable of supernatural abilities like the Bloodsoaked Queen!

“I knew letting you join us was the right choice.” Slyfox felt both envy and jealousy. The kid could very well end up becoming stronger than both him and Mad Dog! “The company’s taken a heavy hit. It’s gonna be real hard for us to recover from this… but if you can reach the Bloodsoaked Queen’s level of power, we can just go and conquer a different wastelands’ outpost. In the future, we’re gonna be the bosses! Fuck begging for scraps.”

Conquer an outpost? Cloudhawk had never even considered this as an option. His dream had always been to leave the wastelands!

As for becoming as powerful as the Bloodsoaked Queen? Cloudhawk didn’t think that was very likely. Exorcist staffs were the lowest-level relics a demonhunter could use, while the Bloodsoaked Queen was most likely a high-level demonhunter!

Cooke was dead. Woola was dead. They had lost far, far too many people.

There was no need to bury the corpses of the dead, because no matter how deep they buried them the corpses would still be unearthed by wild animals. This was simply how things were in the wastelands. They were wastelanders; they lived in the wastelands and died in the wastelands, and when they died they would naturally return to the wastelands in this fashion. The survivors briefly mourned for the dead. Then, they departed.

The twelve surviving mercenaries had all suffered heavy wounds, and the injuries were beginning to take a toll. Even worse, many of the wounds would probably become infected. It could be said that the situation was quite dire. There was no way they could stay here; they had to leave as soon as possible.

Slyfox and Mad Dog led the mercenaries out of the gorge… and when they walked out, their gazes froze.

A tattered, wastelands-style airship was hovering in the air above the ruins up ahead. No one knew when the airship had arrived, but every single mercenary recognized it… and Cloudhawk had seen it once as well. This airship belonged to the rich employer who had employed them multiple times in the past.

These were the ones who had issued the mission to kill the rat king!

A look of fury flashed past Mad Dog’s face. “These sons-of-bitches. They completely fucked us. I should tear a few of their fucking heads off!”

“Don’t move!” A strange look was on Slyfox’s face. He thought quickly, then said, “Don’t let them notice us. We need to leave immediately!”

“Leave?” One of the mercenaries shouted angrily, “We got killed out there on this mission. We gonna walk away without even taking our pay?”

Slyfox whispered in response, “That’s the problem. The intelligence report was completely off. I’ve looked at it from every perspective, and the only answer is that they were TRYING to get us killed.”

Mad Dog was shocked and enraged. “Are you saying they sold us out?”

“Yeah. They sold us out!” Slyfox was clearly beginning to panic. “We need to go right now. Otherwise, we aint gonna make it!”

The mercenaries slowly began to realize the gravity of their situation. When they had first received the mission, they had all been puzzled by many of its irregularities. Right at this moment, they heard a low, bestial growl ring out: “It seems you aren’t as stupid as I thought you were.”

Cloudhawk was badly startled, and the other mercenaries all turned pale as well.

A dark human silhouette stepped out onto the sands. This was a tall, muscular man who was dressed in black leathers. Not an inch of his skin was exposed to the elements. He wore a black breathing apparatus that looked like a long-billed bird’s face, and the apparatus was connected to all sorts of wires and tubes. Rough, ragged breathing could be heard from behind the mask, and a few streaks of white mist belched out of the mouth-opening. It made him look like a freak who had the face of a bird.

It was him! This outfit was too distinctive. Nobody who saw this man would ever be able to forget him.

The mercenaries couldn’t help but take a few steps back. A grim look was on Slyfox’s face as he asked, “Why?”

The man dressed in black leathers cast a cold glance at them, his features hidden by that bird-beaked breathing apparatus. “I liked working with you as well, actually. You are pretty strong for wastelanders… which makes it all the more unfortunate that my master intends to annihilate Blackflag Outpost. You serve as an obstacle, and so I’ll

have to trouble you to die for me."

Blackflag Outpost! He belonged to the same organization as the leader of the sweepers who had just attacked the outpost!

In other words, he was a servant of the demon. His target was the demonhunter… the Bloodsoaked Queen!

Chapter 45
Wipeout

The rat king, despite its power, hadn't been able to wipe the mercenaries out. This was outside of the black-garbed man's expectations. The mercenaries truly were more powerful than he had expected. Still, it didn't matter. Things were still manageable. How much of a threat could these battered, injured, and broken-down mercenaries pose?

The mission had been a scheme from the very start. It was a scheme aimed against the Blackflag Outpost and against the Bloodsoaked Queen. They had already begun to prepare for a full assault against the outpost!

The elite guards of Blackflag Outpost had already suffered heavy losses. The Tartarus mercenaries had been backstabbed and half-destroyed. The Bloodsoaked Queen's injuries had yet to be healed.

The situation was far grimmer than anyone in the outpost knew. Blackflag Outpost was facing the end days.

Right at this moment, a few dozen figures appeared in the area around them. These warriors were all dressed in classic wastelander 'outfits'. They wore rough helmets made from a mishmash of leather and metal, and their faces were half-covered by protective visors which helped block out the sand. They were primarily armed with firearms and longbows. This was a superbly outfitted wastelander squad, and they had all come from the airship. That meant they were the man in black's subordinates.

The man in black said in a very sincere and gentle manner, "How would you prefer to die?"

"Cut the bullshit!" Slyfox lifted his pistol up and fired off a shot at the man in black! The powerful recoil from the shot caused Slyfox to stagger a few steps back, but a thumb-sized hole appeared in the man's chest. "You can die first!"

The shot had hit! Was the man dead? The mercenaries could hardly believe it.

The shot had been at point-blank range, and Slyfox had used one of his most powerful bullets. The shot had struck the man in his vitals and left a huge exit wound. By all rights, no human should be able to survive a shot like that.

All of these factors combined should've meant that there would be no questions about the results… but they were in the wastelands. In the damnable wastelands, nothing was impossible. Nothing was absolute. Common sense was often in short supply here; otherwise, how could a freak like the rat king have arisen?

The man in black didn't fall. He didn't scream. He didn't shake in pain. He didn't seem to even notice that he had been shot… and not a single drop of blood emerged from his wounds. He just stood there, continuing to stare at the mercenaries.

A strange chill crawled up the spines of the mercenaries. It was like Slyfox had shot an immobile block of wood that felt no pain at all.

"Are you surprised?" That hoarse voice rang out from behind the man's strange breathing apparatus. He slowly pulled the black glove off his left hand, revealing something that did not look like a human hand at all. Several black tentacles squirmed out of his 'arm', flexing and tensing like whips. At the end of each tentacle was a sharp, knife-like bone.

This was no normal human. This was a freak, a monster!

Mad Dog drew his machete and charged straight forwards. "Let's see if you are still so cocky after I chop your ass into pieces!"

The man in black swept out with his left arm, the five tentacles coiling around each other as their bone-blades launched attacks from different directions. Mad Dog frantically had to hack right and left in order to defend.

Slash! A wound appeared on Mad Dog's right shoulder. Slash! Another wound appeared on his upper thigh. Slash! Mad Dog was nearly disemboweled!

"Stop fighting and run like hell!" Slyfox bellowed as he hurriedly fired off two more shots at the man in black. One bullet struck the man in the chest, while the other hit the man in the head. The second shot shattered half of the man's mask, piercing through his skull and sending him staggering backwards. The man in black pressed a hand to his head, letting out a low growl. Clearly, this freak was only vulnerable in the head… but even a perfect head-shot hadn't been enough to immediately kill him.

The wastelander warriors were beginning to close in on them. If this fight continued, they would quickly end up surrounded. All of their foes were armed with long-distance weapons. If the mercenaries let themselves be surrounded and shot at from afar, there was no question that they would all die.

Cloudhawk and the mercenaries hurriedly ran over to support the badly-injured Mad Dog, then frantically began to flee. By now, the man in black had managed to once more rise to his feet, a bullet in the palm of his hand. The wound in his head was slowly healing, and his flesh and blood were visibly regrowing across his face.

No wonder this freak wasn't afraid of bullets! He was a terrifyingly strong recovery metahuman. You had to kill him instantly; otherwise, his wounds would recuperate within an extremely short period of time. The sweeper leader who had led the previous assault against Blackflag Outpost had been a control metahuman who was freakishly strong… but today, they encountered an even greater freak.

How many subordinates like them did this 'demon' have? Cloudhawk had no idea! What about the Bloodsoaked Queen? Would she be able to survive this fight?

Still, this wasn't the time to be worrying about the Bloodsoaked Queen. If the Tartarus mercenaries were fully staffed and in top physical condition, they might be able to give this freak a good fight. Now, however, they had no chance at all… and the man in black had a few dozen fully armed warriors coming to reinforce him!

Cloudhawk ran up ahead while helping to hold Mad Dog up. Slyfox was in the middle, while three of the mercenaries served as the rearguard. The mercenaries frantically ran up a slope, unable to see what was on the other side. It seemed like there was an extremely sharp cliff up ahead, but there was nowhere for them to run.

As the man in black chased after them, he suddenly slung out his right tentacle-hand out towards them. It tore through the skies like a blurred shadow, reaching towards the mercenaries.

The sharp attack came with incredible speed, forcing two of the mercenaries to come to a halt, pull out their weapons, then turn around and defend. However, they were each only able to block two or three attacks before the tentacles managed to pierce past their defenses, leaving giant gaping wounds in their neck as the bone-blades severed their windpipes and arteries.

The two mercenaries collapsed on the hilly terrain, unable to let out as much as a final scream. They pressed their hands to their necks, unable to staunch the spurting blood. After struggling for a few moments, they stopped moving.

The man in black didn't move that quickly, but given the shape the mercenaries were in, it was going to be virtually impossible for them to shake him.

"That's a cliff up ahead!" Mad Dog howled angrily, shaking off the supporting hands of Cloudhawk and the other mercenary next to him. He was completely covered in wounds, and the one to his chest was especially deep. His innards were visible to the naked eye. "Run! All of you, run! I'll stop them!"

Mad Dog knew that his wounds were too heavy. He chose to die in combat, fighting to his last breath!

"We'll help out!" Three of the surviving mercenaries came to a halt, looks of determination on their faces as they said to Slyfox, "Slyfox, Boss, run!"

The man in black was simply too strong, and he had numerous reinforcements. It was impossible for all of them to escape; if they tried, they'd simply die one by one!

What they had to do was sacrifice a few to buy the others some extra time. The strongest close combat mercenary was Mad Dog, but he was in such a sorry shape that there was no way he could stop the man in black all by himself. The three who had chosen to join him in his final stand were all some of the most talented mercenaries in the Tartarus company; if they all worked together, they should be able to survive for a minute or two.

Everyone knew that there was no chance of victory here. In choosing to stay, they had chosen death.

"I fucked up everything else in my life, but the best decision I ever made was to become friends with you, fatass. During the past twenty years, we built up this company and tore through the wastelands. We drank, we killed, we fucked women… I enjoyed the hell out of it all!" Mad Dog stared at the wastelanders closing in on them, but a look of peace was on his ugly, savage, blood-soaked black face. Ignoring his wounds, he lifted up his machetes and charged towards the enemies: "This life was worth it! I'll meet you in the next!"

"Being part of the Tartarus company has been the greatest honor of our lives!" The

other three mercenaries followed right behind Mad Dog. “Mad Dog! Let’s die together and party together in the afterlife!”

They weren’t as legendarily strong as Mad Dog, nor were they as skilled and talented as Slyfox. However, they had loved being able to be led by a pair of such illustrious wastelanders. They had fought together, they had adventured together… and today, they would die together. What was there to regret? If they could choose to redo their lives, they would still choose to join!

The enemy wastelanders began to fire upon them from afar. The man in black struck out with his five bladed tentacle-fingers, attacking all four of them at once. However, this naturally reduced the pressure on each of them individually. Mad Dog was able to dodge several lethal strikes in a row. Screened by the others, he charged forwards and delivered a furious blow with his machete.

CLANG!

The man in black used his right arm to block the strike.

Mad Dog was more than twice as strong as Cooke. The tremendous power behind his blow completely destroyed the enemy’s right glove… but the right hand was different from the left hand. The right hand was humanoid in nature, but it was extremely thick and covered with what looked like an outer layer of bones. The bones were nearly as tough as steel… but when faced with Mad Dog’s machete-strike, the bones began to crack and shatter. This was a testament to how mighty Mad Dog was!

The man in black was strong as well. After blocking Mad Dog’s strike with his right arm, he seized the moment to deliver three consecutive strikes from his left arm with his tentacles. Mad Dog’s chest, abdomen, and back were all stabbed.

The mercenaries howled with rage, “MAD DOG!”

Blood was pouring from Mad Dog’s lips. He summoned one final burst of energy, delivering a machete-blow to the man in black’s head and plunging it halfway inside.

Mad Dog was completely, thoroughly spent. If he was at his normal level of strength, he probably would have severed the man’s head. No amount of regenerative power would’ve allowed the man in black to recover from that!

But… in the wastelands, there were no ‘ifs’.

Mad Dog had already done everything he could. Four shots rang out from afar, and all three of the mercenaries were hit. By now, their bodies had been reduced to a parody of blood and gore, but they continued to fight with complete fearlessness, plunging their knives and swords into the body of the man in black.

For a moment, time itself seemed to freeze. The four mercenaries had battled to the very end, until the very moment that life left their bodies!

When Cloudhawk turned to look back, all he saw was Mad Dog's corpse be torn apart into multiple pieces by those bone-blades. Blood and gore splattered the yellow earth, and the other three mercenaries had fallen into that pool of blood, never to rise again.

"Mad Dog, I'm coming too! Wait for me!"

Slyfox knew what had happened. He knew that his friend of twenty years had just reached the end of the line.

Twenty years. Twenty years of friendship! They had been together for so long, had faced the brutal wastelands together. In this age of darkness, truly trustworthy friends were as rare as unicorns… but their friendship had lasted for twenty years!

No grief or pain was visible on Slyfox's face. Grief and pain were emotions for weaker, lesser beings. The wastelands had no room for the weak. It was the destiny of every mercenary to die; Mad Dog had simply died a bit earlier than they had planned.

What waited for them on the other side of this hill? Sand dunes? A cliff? Life? Death? The mercenaries would never have the chance to find out.

The man in black and his wastelanders were in hot pursuit, and their bullets and arrows filled the air around the remaining mercenaries. The hill in front of them was a hundred meters away, but there wasn't enough time. Time was a commodity, and they had used it all up.

Slyfox shouted at Cloudhawk, "Kid, run like hell and don't turn back. Just jump down!"

"But…"

"Escape! That's an order! And stay alive, that's another order!" Slyfox gradually began to slow down as he continued to shout at Cloudhawk. "You need t'become stronger an' tougher than anyone else. Find the fuckers behind this and then take revenge for us,

got it? GO!”

Slyfox came to a halt, as did the final surviving mercenaries. They had already decided to fight to the death.

Cloudhawk’s mind was completely blank as he continued his headlong rush. He heard the sound of gunfire from behind him, as well as the angry howls of the mercenaries as they charged into certain death. These sounds flayed his soul like knives, the most horrifying curses he had ever heard.

Run! Live! Vengeance!

Ignoring all else, Cloudhawk clambered up the hill, a sense of despair and wooziness in his mind. There really was a cliff at the end of the hill, and it was massive. It was like a gaping chasm that was hundreds of meters deep and at a perfect ninety degree angle. There was nothing which could slow his descent, and at the bottom was rubble.

Had there been no hope at all from the very beginning? They had fought and struggled… but in the end, they had already reached the end of the line.

Cloudhawk crouched by himself at the edge of the cliff, like a wounded animal that had been driven into a corner. He turned his head, only to see that all of the mercenaries had fallen. Slyfox was slumped over a boulder. He had taken at least ten shots, and his eyes were open and staring fixedly at Cloudhawk. No life was in those eyes.

Cloudhawk never would’ve imagined that Slyfox would’ve given the only chance at survival to him, a rookie who had joined them just two months ago. He never would’ve imagined that this fat and selfish man and his brutal mercenary comrades would sacrifice their own lives for the sake of giving him a chance.

Cloudhawk rose to his feet, raising his head towards the skies and letting out a primal scream. Wind howled past him, kicking up a storm of yellow sand. He was a tiny speck in the wilderness, an inconsequential pinprick… and yet his voice travelled very, very far, and it was filled with stunning power!

It was a primal cry of resistance, of stubbornness, of rage! He was cursing both the skies and the earth. Most of all, he cursed the wastelands!

He was nothing more than an ant, but an ant who dared scream into the face of the

uncaring heavens. He was small and weak, not worthy of concern or fear, but even at the very end he refused to bow his head in the face of destiny.

Cloudhawk jumped into the air… and tumbled straight down the cliff.

By the time the dozens of wastelander warriors arrived at the edges of the cliff, they saw nothing more than a few mutated black crows. The youth had long ago disappeared.

Had he fallen to his death? The cliff was hundreds of meters high; anybody who fell from such great heights would die!

The only way Cloudhawk could've survived was if he grew wings like an actual hawk and soared into the skies. Otherwise, no amount of miracles could've kept him alive!

Chapter 46
Another World

Cloudhawk plunged down the tall cliff, certain that he was going to die. There was no grasping at straws, no praying for some strange miracle. His body was completely relaxed, and his mind was completely free and at ease. He truly was like a hawk who was about to die, but was going to enjoy one final dive before doing so.

This was a feeling of freedom, a moment in which his soul was completely empty and at peace.

However… just as Cloudhawk was at peace, the stone in front of his chest suddenly began to activate, releasing incredible amounts of heat and a large amount of invisible yet powerful energy which swept across the area, causing space to twist and distort as though it was water that was being brought to a boil.

It was happening! It was happening again! Cloudhawk seemed to have suddenly understood something, and he began to flail about madly like a drowning man who didn't know how to swim. The space around him began to completely twist into a whirlpool that looked much like the vortex which would form if someone stirred a pool of water.

A heartbeat later… the entire world seemed to split apart.

Cloudhawk suddenly felt as though he was seeing straight through to the very essence of all things. There was no light, no darkness, no matter, no energy. There were only those countless vibrating strings. Some were straight while others were looped, but all of them were vibrating and oscillating like the strings of a guitar, producing a strange melody as they did so.

These things were the underpinnings of the very essence of all things. These countless vibrating strings came together to form matter. All types of matter were, on a fundamental level, the same. The only difference was the rate at which they vibrated, which caused them to manifest in different ways and which eventually produced the many different types of matter which made up this multi-varied world.

It all happened so incredibly quickly. Space rippled around Cloudhawk, and he then disappeared while falling from midair. By the time the world reassembled itself, Cloudhawk had come crashing down into a pile of rubble.

The fall wasn't a light one, nor was it too heavy. All that could be said was that at least he didn't splatter apart upon contact with the ground. There was no way he had just fallen a few hundred meters. Still, Cloudhawk felt woozy and weak, almost as though his body was about to fall apart. He had to summon all of the remaining energy in his body just to crawl to his feet.

Where was he?

The skies were dark and gloomy, filled with rolling dark clouds. When the sunlight shone down through them it painted a scene of dreary and desolate beauty. The light looked like dark yellow dragons roving through the skies. The air in this place was filled with quite a bit of dust, giving it a dreamlike quality.

Where was the cliff? There was no cliff!

It wasn't just the skies which were as dark as dusk. The world for a thousand kilometers around him consisted of nothing more than strewn boulders and rolling plains. There were no hills to speak of, much less cliffs. However, an ancient yet beautiful ruins was standing there silently within the empty lands.

These ruins appeared to be far more ancient than any of the wastelands ruins which Cloudhawk had seen in the past, and it was completely stylistically different from those ruins as well. The vast majority of the buildings looked like erect stone pillars, while the others looked like perfectly formed geometrical shapes. There were pyramids, there were cubes, there were spheres, there were octahedrons, and more. Although they had been baptized by wind and dust for countless years, the vast majority of them continued to stand tall.

Every single building was covered with decorative script that linked together in complex, abstruse diagrams that seemed to follow a certain cadence or rhythm. These things definitely didn't come from any age or era on Earth. The area around them was littered with many bones from gigantic monsters, and judging from the size of the bones these behemoths had to have been at least a hundred meters long.

Cloudhawk found all of this incredibly hard to believe. There was no way this was the

world he lived in! Although he had no clue what was going on, it seemed likely that in the moment when his life hung in the balance, he had managed to somehow accidentally activate that strange stone. He had awakened it, causing it to release its energies and teleport Cloudhawk to this place.

Something like this had already happened once. Cloudhawk had experienced something similar a year or so ago, when he had been forced into those tunnels. He still clearly remembered how he had been teleported to a place which had two suns… but the strange thing was, this time he had been sent to a completely different place. Were the locations the stone sent him to chosen at random? Then where was he now?

Cloudhawk felt joy at having survived in the face of certain death, but he was also filled with confusion and fear of the unknown. What if he was the only person in this entire world? Would he be trapped here forever? What was he to do?

Cloudhawk thought back to the mercenaries and the miserable deaths they had died. They had all died for him! Now that the man in black had killed the mercenaries, his next target would definitely be the Bloodsoaked Queen.

Cloudhawk had to take revenge for Tartarus! He had to go back and warn the Queen! And he had to kill that detestable ‘demon’!

Cloudhawk clenched the stone around his neck and shouted, “Send me back! You hear me? Send me back now!”

The stone had once more fallen silent. No matter how Cloudhawk shook it, it didn’t react at all. Cloudhawk had no choice but to put it aside for now. At least he had managed to survive; so long as he was alive, he’d find a way to get back. He forced himself to calm down, then began to search within the ruins.

The ruins were enormous in size and scale; just the ordinary stone pillars were over a hundred meters tall. Cloudhawk was like an ant in comparison, slowly winding his way through the strewn stones. Far off in the distance, there was an incredibly vast rectangular stone stele that had a statue on each side. The statues weren’t of humans; they were of some sort of strange creature which he had never seen before.

Cloudhawk wasn’t interested in statues, nor was he interested in the buildings. He was, however, intrigued when he discovered an opening within the rectangular stone stele. He was wind-beaten and completely parched; he couldn’t just keep on wasting

his remaining energy just running around randomly. He decided to first go inside the building and rest for a time.

The passageway into the building was extremely large, and its walls were lined with clear, intricate paintings. Although Cloudhawk didn't recognize the strange script, he could more or less understand that the images were depicting the people of this world undergoing some sort of religious ritual. Cloudhawk was in no mood to examine things more closely, however, because he discovered to his amazement that the insides of the building were lit.

The light seemed to come from the walls, the pillars, the ceiling, and even the floor itself. The strange material which this building was made of seemed to have absorbed light from the outside world and then released it from the inside. So long as there was light outside, the insides of the building would never fall dark. Cloudhawk didn't understand by what principles this worked, nor did he care to.

Suddenly, Cloudhawk froze. He could vaguely sense a strange ripple in the air, a ripple which he was extremely familiar with. It had to be a divine relic generating this ripple.

Cloudhawk nervously called out, "Who's there!" But the only response was his voice echoing within the empty building.

Cloudhawk pulled out his exorcist staff, slowly and casually advancing towards the source of the ripples. After moving past multiple pillars, he finally found the source. It was actually a man dressed in voluminous robes who was kneeling on the ground, his back facing Cloudhawk. There was no way to see his face from behind, but Cloudhawk could tell that an extremely thick layer of dust was covering this man's body, so thick that it seemed as though the man had become part of the building itself.

Cloudhawk slowly turned his gaze higher. The black-robed man was facing what looked like an absolutely enormous idol. Due to the overall dimness of the lighting, Cloudhawk wasn't able to tell what the idol looked like exactly. Cloudhawk walked over, using his tri-bladed exorcist staff to poke the kneeling man.

As soon as Cloudhawk did this, the robes completely fell collapsed in an explosion of dust, revealing corroded bones underneath. Cloudhawk couldn't help but start to cough. *Ah, shit.* It was someone who had died so long ago that even most of his bones had disintegrated.

Cloudhawk picked up the black robes and gave them a good shake, causing a large amount of bone dust to come flying out from it. Apparently, this was actually some sort of hooded cloak.

"Wait, this is a relic!" The hooded cloak had endured the passage of a thousand winters without being destroyed. Cloudhawk had no idea what the thing was made out of, but it felt completely weightless in his hands. Although it looked rather grimy and ugly, it felt extremely glossy and sleek to the touch. However, what truly intrigued Cloudhawk was the fact that it was emanating the ripples of a divine relic.

Cloudhawk revealed a look of excitement. He then turned, reaching out and flipping through the shards of bone on the ground. He had spent over a year studying dissection and anatomy alongside Mantis, and so he was very familiar with the human skeletal structure. Clearly, these bones did not belong to humans. However, that didn't really matter; what mattered was the fact that Cloudhawk found yet another object amongst the bones which emanated relic ripples.

This object looked like a gourd. It was palm-sized and fiery-red, but covered in dark golden runes. Judging from the strength of the ripples, this was probably a relic of quite some power. It was at least on par with the sacred crossblade of light which the Bloodsoaked Queen used, and it was possibly even stronger.

"So this is a demonhunter's skeleton?" Cloudhawk stared at the bones littering the ground, puzzled. This place clearly was not any part of the world which Cloudhawk came from. Why, then, did it also have demonhunters? And the corpse had been kneeling towards this idol. Were these the so-called 'gods'?

Cloudhawk wiped the two divine relics clean, then gave them a close look. He discovered to his great surprise that the hooded cloak and the gourd both had a strange insignia on them. He pulled out his relic to compare them to the one on his exorcist staff, only to discover that the insignias were virtually identical?

But before he had a chance to thoroughly think through the implications of this, a deep hiss could be heard coming from outside the hall.

Cloudhawk's entire body tensed up as a sense of tremendous danger filled his mind. By the time Cloudhawk turned to look towards the direction from which the sound came, an enormous shadow could be seen slowly crawling forward past the stone columns.

What the hell is this?! A giant snake? But this is huge!

The creature's torso alone was four or five times thicker than Cloudhawk, and its body was indescribably long. It coiled its body around one of the stone columns, its ashen-white scales glittering with cold, metallic light.

Hisses could be heard from the other direction as well. Cloudhawk discovered, to his horror, that there wasn't just one of these creatures inside. Every single pillar had these creatures slowly coiling their way downwards. Each creature was indescribably vast, and Cloudhawk had been completely surrounded.

One of the giant, ashen-white creatures descended to the ground from the pillar closest to Cloudhawk. It slowly extended its head, and when Cloudhawk was able to see it clearly he felt his scalp go numb. It had the body of a giant serpent, but the head was that of a lion's and its eyes glowed with cold green light.

Suddenly, the beast charged straights towards Cloudhawk, moving as fast as a streak of lightning.

Cloudhawk had never seen a terrifying monster like this before. Most likely, even if the entire Tartarus company came back to life, the only result would be them being wiped out a second time… and there were dozens of the things!

But just as the monster opened its great maw and bit down, the strange stone around Cloudhawk's neck suddenly woke up once more, releasing a stream of light that caused him to disappear just as the jaws closed around him.

Cloudhawk was back in the wastelands once more.

What was going on, exactly!? Cloudhawk stared in silent shock as the strange stone slowly dimmed once more. This time, it seemed to have fallen into an even deeper state of slumber.

The hooded cloak and small gourd in Cloudhawk's hands was proof that it hadn't all been just a dream. He really had visited an unimaginably strange world, then returned with divine relics that did not belong to the wastelands. Cloudhawk was vaguely beginning to understand the nature of the abilities of this strange stone.

Why did it have this sort of abilities? How were all of these worlds connected? These were mysteries for Cloudhawk to work through later. Right now, the most pressing

thing at hand was for him to immediately return to Blackflag Outpost. It was possible that the battle had already begun and that the Bloodsoaked Queen was in grave danger!

Cloudhawk scanned the area around him. He was lucky enough to recognize it as a place they had crossed earlier, and he was able to find the vehicles which the Tartarus mercenaries had parked out in the wastelands. He pulled out a canteen of water, gulping it down and enjoying the sensation of its cool moisture flooding his body.

Cloudhawk then clambered onto the 'iron lizard', then revved up the engine. He had done plenty of maintenance work on the vehicles during the past few weeks. Although he hadn't actually driven them, he knew how they worked. As for the actual driving? He'd learn it on the go.

The 'iron lizard' slowly began to work its way across the wastelands, accelerating to greater and greater speeds. This was his first time driving, and Cloudhawk was every bit as crazy a driver as the mercenaries had been.

Right now, Cloudhawk had only one thing in his mind… he was going to get back as soon as he could, then run some of those bastards over!

Chapter 47
The Fallen Outpost

The setting sun continued to bake the wastelands with its scorching, parching, and blazing light.

The gates to Blackflag Outpost were tightly shut. Men hefted weapons in their hands, arranged in tight ranks as they waited patiently. Thousands of bloodshot eyes scanned the wilderness. It had been two days and two nights since any of them had slept.

Facing them was an army of more than a thousand sweepers arrayed in a dense formation.

Where did these sweepers come from? What did these sweepers want? No one knew! Two days ago, the mutants had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. They surrounded the outpost but didn't attack it, just staring at it from afar. The warriors of Blackflag Outpost were kept in a constant state of tense nervousness. They didn't dare to fall asleep, and their nerves were shot. They were close to the point of mental collapse.

The sweepers were led by two commanders. The first was a beak-faced youth who had wings and could fly in the air. The second was a muscular man with two curved ox-like horns and whose skin seemed to be made out of some sort of black metal.

The winged youth looked rather impatient as he irritably scraped his twin scimitars against each other. "Why is our big brother taking so much time to deal with a few miserable mercenaries? Blackflag Outpost is no big deal anyhow. The two of us are more than enough to wipe it out. Let's just start."

"Did you forget how our little brother died?" The horned man was seated on a rock, and he spoke in a deep and patient voice that was completely different from his brutish appearance: "Wait a bit longer. Don't get impatient."

The winged man couldn't fathom what his brother was worried about. "Surely you don't think that bitch is stronger than our master?"

"We can't rule out that there may be traps. The master must be vigilant – he protects

from the shadows, doesn't fight from the front." The horned fellow swung his eyes toward his companion. "In the grand scheme our lives don't mean shit. Our job is to make sure not even the smallest danger threatens the master."

The winged man was silent, he knew second brother was right. There were forces at play in the wasteland they paled in comparison to. The wasteland needed a master.

Just then a cry broke the relative silence. A ragged wasteland airship was coming their way, kicking up a torrent of wind and sand. It was a hundred meters tall and split the twilight horizon as it made its way toward Blackflag Outpost.

Was he finally back? Could they start the slaughter?! Excitement gleamed dangerously in the winged man's eyes. His horned companion unfurled from atop the rock and stood.

All of a sudden a fierce wind was kicked up all around them. Billowing clouds of sand arose as though they'd been stirred up by giant, invisible hands. The clouds swirled around and around until they become a tornado.

The outpost's defenders were stunned as they witnessed the supernatural disaster form before their eyes.

"*Shit!*"

"The hell is this?!"

As though on queue the tornado tore forward, throwing everything in its path high into the sand-choked air. The sound of it was like a hundred thousand rattlesnakes beating their tails.

The cries of elite soldiers hollered out to the others. "Hit the deck!"

Half a moment later the tornado struck the make-shift parapets and tore it to shreds. Ten soldiers where flung into the sky like detritus, even their screams were lost to the deadly sands. Nearby buildings of weaker construction were reduced to rubble by the tugging winds alone.

As the summoned storm pierced the Outpost's defenses, it rapidly started to decay. Far from being a cause to celebrate, however, it spat out plumes of sand in all directions and blinded the defenders. As their world was cast into a choking fog, chaos

erupted among the Outpost warriors.

A crazed fanaticism burned in the horned man's eyes. "Master blesses us with cover. Tear this place apart!"

The winged commander let loose a howl of excitement. His wings beat furiously, thrusting him into the air and leaving whirling dust devils in his wake. He shot like a bullet into the sky, to the chorus of bloodthirsty cries from the sweepers below. Together they advanced through the wind and sand toward Blackflag Outpost's crumbling walls.

At last, the battle had begun!

"They're coming!"

"Everyone, get ready for a fight!"

Warriors shuffled through the unnatural darkness, rushing to try and maintain some sort of defensive formation. One wastelander clambered over the wall and met the defenders with a swing of its heavy axe. It cut through a warrior's head with a sickening crunch before being wrenched free and turned on another.

Bloodcurdling howls echoed through the sandy darkness. The two sides clashed.

There were three times as many sweepers this time as there were in the last assault, while Blackflag Outpost's defenses had taken a big hit. What remained of their elite squad used their survivability and organization to rally the defenders and prepare for the desperate fight.

A shadow stretched over them. Peering through the stinging sands the outpost's fighters could make out an oval shape lumbering through the skies above them. It was the black-clad man's airship. That was about as far as their thoughts went before they were interrupted by a series of cracks.

"Ahh! *Aarrgghh!* Agghh!!"

A hail of bullets descended on them, ripping through the defenders and turning them into howling fountains of blood. What flesh and blood creature could survive a tempest of hot lead? It was spat from a rare treasure of the wastelands, a minigun bolted to the frame of the airship. Already it was clear which side held the advantage.

Disaster had befallen the Outpost warriors. Wherever the enemy airship passed it left piles of corpses and rivers of blood in its wake. Sweepers broke through the walls in droves to swarm over the hellscape and look for victims. Men, women, children – it didn't matter, if it breathed it was torn apart.

Could this even be called a battle? It was genocide!

Blackflag Outpost had fallen. This bastion of society in the wasteland was no more. The Bloodsoaked Queen walked through the slaughter, swaying slightly with every step.

All of these people were dead because of her. Although she was a child of the gods, a noble demonhunter who spurned these heathens, witnessing their heartless massacre wasn't something she could simply put out of mind.

They were lives of ignorance and evil – but they were lives nonetheless!

No question remained as to who would win this conflict. The overwhelming numbers and advantages of the sweepers proved too much for the Outpost. Even if she were stronger, the Bloodsoaked Queen couldn't turn this foul situation round.

Blackflag Outpost was destined to be wiped into obscurity. Its denizens were either consigned to rot as corpses, or fled in whatever direction their legs would take them. All the while there were screams, blood, murder, brutality – how could anyone not be scarred by this nightmare?!

A group of four or five sweepers came across the Bloodsoaked Queen. They immediately brandished their axes and, with a guttural battle cry, flung themselves at her.

In one fluid movement the Queen kicked her foot, lifting an iron sword that'd been half hurried in the dirt. She caught it in midair, and before the mob could even draw close they were met by streaks of cold light. Precise, deadly, vicious. One after the other the sweepers fell to the ground, spurting blood from their open throats.

Demonhunters were the mightiest warriors of the elysian lands. Even if absent their godly relics, no typical enemy could stand against them.

Out of the wind-borne sands a cluster of bone-tipped tentacles shot forth. They whipped and cut through the air like a meat grinder, fast and cruel. Erratic and deadly,

the sudden attack was practically impossible to defend against.

Clang, crack, bang!

The crude iron sword in the Queen's grip seemed to take on a life of its own. Like a viper it lashed out at the tentacles, blocking each one. None managed to slip passed her cover.

A shrill cry rang out from overhead. What little light remained glinted off of a pair machetes, carving a deadly path her way. They were aimed to meet at the snow-white flesh of her neck, ready to sever her head from her body.

The Bloodsoaked Queen reeled backward just in time. She could only see the light of the machetes as it flit by, shaving several hairs in its passage. A moment later a figure appeared behind her bearing the offending weapons. Fast as lightning, the shadow struck again.

She swung the sword around and held it backwards in her grip.

Clang! The iron sword knocked the machetes away!

Next the earth shook beneath her feet, followed by a thunderous roar and the sound of splintering stone. From the corner of her eye she saw a massive figure, pitch black, burst through a structure on her left. The wall didn't appear to slow this monster down in the least, and it bore down on the Queen like a bloodthirsty rhinoceros.

Again she swung her sword around to meet this new threat. What followed was the grating sound of steel breaking apart. The Bloodsoaked Queen staggered backwards with the ruins of a sword in hand. The sheer force of the impact had practically turned her weapon to dust. Whoever this foe was, they had strength to surpass both Grizzly and Mad Dog.

"Protecting yourself from a combined attack with nothing but a crude sword." The unsettling man in black emerged from the sandstorm. On his left was the bull-horned monster that had nearly flattened her. On his right was a younger warrior with a pair of wings. They glared hungrily at the powerful Queen for a time before the black-clad aberration spoke again in its low, gravelly voice. "'Bloodsoaked Queen' is a well-earned moniker."

As he spoke figures began to close in on them, silhouettes barely visible through the

sand. They revealed themselves to be twenty elite sweepers, with bows drawn and arrows knocked. All deadlier weapons than the splinters of the Queen's ruined sword.

Her face hidden behind the demonic mask, none of the Queen's assailants knew what she was thinking. Almost flippantly she cast the hilt of her ruined weapon aside. Her bare hands were quickly filled with balls of roiling flame.

These three mutants were not your typical foe!

The one in black, she knew, could regenerate quickly. Only a single, definitive attack could put him down, otherwise he was practically impossible to kill. The bull-horned man-beast was strength-focused, and a single blow from him would either cripple or outright kill her. The winged youth was possessed of supernatural agility, with great speed and keen reaction time. Against him, life or death could be decided in the blink of an eye.

Against the three of them even the demonhunter was outmatched. She needed to use relics!

The Bloodsoaked Queen, mighty as she was, had her limits. Battling against these three mutants, how could she protect herself from this host of assassins that had surrounded her? What's more, she hadn't fully recovered from her wounds and quickly dispatching of her three most irritating assailants would be no easy task.

The black man's voice slithered out, cold as the grave. "Kill her!"

The twang of bows loosing their payload filled the air.

The Queen threw herself behind a collapsed wall, causing the deadly bolts to bury themselves in her cover. With a gleeful cry the winged mutant shot into the air, only to descend upon her like a meteor. The man in black and the horned warrior raced after her on the ground. They converged on her in an instant.

Ten sweepers were right on their heels.

She could be twice as strong and still the Queen was outnumbered. Not only did she have to dodge arrows fired from the darkness, she also had to protect herself from the three mutants and a contingent of sweepers.

Thud! The Queen felt something strike her shoulder and a spray of blood spat forth.

She'd been struck by a sniper, injured!

With perfect timing the winged man attacked with his machetes. The cunning monster in black lashed out with its whip-like tentacles. The twin-horned man charged ahead regardless of obstacle, flailing his inky-black fists.

Wrath, indignation and cold-blooded homicidal intent sprang up in the Bloodsoaked Queen's eyes.

She clenched her right fist and her glove burst into flame. She lashed out, and like a belching flame from a dragon's maw a plume of fire erupted outward. For all his girth and muscle, the bull-horned mutant was blasted several meters away like a ragdoll.

Chapter 48
Knock 'Em Flying

The Bloodsoaked Queen had two divine relics. One was the 'Burning Angel', while the other was the sacred crossblade of light. Both were relics from her clan, with the Burning Angel being the glove she wore on her hand.

Legends claimed that if the demonhunter was powerful enough, a touch from the burning angels could set anything ablaze. Wood, stone, even iron – a caress was enough to make it belch fire. Flammable or not, the power of the relic consumed all.

Though the Bloodsoaked Queen was not as powerful as the legends described, she could incinerate any flesh and blood obstacle within her reach. No amount of luck could protect her victim once she laid hands on them.

However, when her strike landed it didn't feel like hitting flesh. It felt like metal. The horned man was wreathed in flame but they did not reach any vital part of him. The mutant rolled around in the sand for a moment to quench the fires, and it was revealed the only result was a scorched mark on his chest. Certainly nothing to threaten his life.

The man in black hissed a mocking laugh. "Second brother has the strongest defenses. Even for a young demonhunter you are weak. Did you honestly believe you were strong enough to face our master? So naïve!"

"What I didn't expect," the Queen said through her mask, "was that your 'master' would be so fond of raising stupid mutts."

None of them were offended or enraged by her insult – for they agreed. Each of them were proud to be loyal servants of the master, vicious dogs in his service. They would tear the throats out of whoever he told them to without ever questioning who or why.

"Are you demonhunters any different? Dogs as well, with gods who hold your tether. We're no different, you and I!"

"You refuse to accept reality, and harass us because of your dogmatic assumptions. What gives you the right to be so self-righteous? Do you think you understand the

wastelands at all? What right do you have to pass judgment on us?"

The black-clad mutant waved his hand. The sweepers raised their weapons, ready to put her down for good.

The Bloodsoaked Queen bolted from her hiding place like a bat out of hell. The thud of bullets and crossbow bolts followed her, buried in the sand inches from her heels. She was shadowed by the winged mutant who descended from on high. He held his machetes reversed in his grip but cut with such speed and ferocity it seemed there were dozens of strikes raining down.

The Queen thrust out her hands, fingers curled in like a tiger's claw. With staggering accuracy she caught the winged man's blurred machetes out of the air and poured the power coalesced in her palms right through them. They immediately began to glow with white hot heat.

With a yelp the winged man's hands went slack and he was blasted away. The black-garbed man and his horned companion charged in for another attempt.

The man in black attacked first, lashing out with five viper-like tentacles. With startling accuracy they splayed out toward specific targets; her face, throat, chest and other vital parts. They hissed through the air like arrows from a hundred archers, seeking her heart with a shrill whistling cadence.

The horned man's attacks weren't flashy or even terribly skilled. He relied on overwhelming strength, and so intense was the punch that its effects were felt even before they landed. Punch after punch, propelled by pure force mighty enough to level mountains.

The Bloodsoaked Queen was knocked back, and the assault slowed her escape. It was only a little, but enough. One of the bullets found its mark and buried itself in her thigh. She lost her balance.

The Bloodsoaked Queen bit back her pain. She focused more energy into her hands, gripping tight to the machetes wrenched from the winged man. They glowed red, and when she threw them they became disks of molten steel. Both of them erupted in midair and set searing shrapnel flying out in every direction. The pained whines and howls of sweepers answered.

The Queen stumbled, rolled, and shot back to her feet. The wound in her leg was deep

and bright fresh blood oozed freely from it, but she didn't have time to examine the injury now. The five tentacles of the black-garbed monster were on her, and the horned behemoth was bearing down on her position.

She managed to dodge the tentacles, but in doing so left herself open to the horned beast's fists. As his blow landed she was thrown through the ruined buildings of the outpost like a marionette with its strings severed. He was monstrous, a single successful hit nearly broke her in half.

"Kill her!"

The sweepers raised their weapons, training them on the Queen. Gnarled fingers applied pressure to hair triggers when suddenly shouts rang up that caught their attention. A group of outpost warriors who had rallied together were charging at the twisted beasts. Caught unprepared, they were quickly cut down.

The Bloodsoaked Queen took this opportunity to flee. She struggled to move as quickly as she could, despite her grievous wounds.

"We can't defend the outpost!"

"Queen, we must retreat!"

Grizzly put his fist through one of the sweeper's heads like it was an overripe melon. He was covered in blood, some his but mostly others, as he hurried to the Queen's side. When he saw that she had not suffered any life threatening wounds he breathed a sigh of relief. However her injuries were anything but slight, and that filled him with an indescribably fury.

These fucking bastards*! They dared harm my Queen?!*

Grizzly had managed to assemble ten elite fighters and twenty to thirty conscripts. They weren't a strong unit by any means, but they would serve in an emergency. At the very least they could pin down a sizeable group of sweepers.

The Bloodsoaked Queen knew that now was not the time to tarry and fight war. With Cloudhawk's help she'd recovered from her wounds, but not completely. She was only capable of commanding a little more than sixty percent of her full strength. Besides being less than at her peak she'd also suffered wounds to her shoulder and leg. The punch that horned bastard had landed also caused considerable internal damage.

Keeping up the fight was ill-advised.

Grizzly screamed at her with all the force of his namesake. "*Go!"*

Sinister, snake-like laughter hissed through the air. "You think you can get away?"

The winged youth skimmed low over the ground and snapped up a long knife from the ground. A group of soldiers moved to stop him but were viciously cut down. The man in black and the horned titan moved in for the kill. Despite the efforts of the soldiers, sweepers were closing in on all sides.

Warriors started dropping like flies. Their circle of defiance was quickly shrinking.

Grizzly punched one of the wastelanders so hard his chest caved. He swung around to face his next foe, and found himself face to face with an enormous specimen. He was pitch black, and two enormous horns rose from its skull.

"Get the fuck outta my way!"

Grizzly didn't give a damn who his enemy was. He snapped a jab with his iron-clad hand aimed for the horned mutant's chest. His foe didn't dodge or block. The punch connected and the horned man staggered back several steps. A small rivulet of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, but otherwise the beast was unfazed.

What?

Grizzly looked at the mutant, dumbfounded. He was one of the strongest fighters in the outpost, matched only by Tartarus' captain, Mad Dog. The horned man didn't seem to care though. He didn't block or move, he just took the punch like it was nothing.

The titan wiped the blood from his mouth. He glared at Grizzly with dark, murderous eyes. "You've got some strength. But not enough!"

He punctuated his words with a full-armed punch.

Grizzly paid his words no mind. When he saw the fist he answered by throwing one of his own. They met mid-air with such force that it sounded like thunder. It was followed by the sound of splintering bone and Grizzly's earsplitting cries.

He crumbled to the ground, cradling what remained of his hand. The iron glove was

dented and inside his fingers were a mangled mess. His arm had become an amorphous ruin of bone flecks and tenderized meat. Jagged bits of bone jutted out in several places.

“Grizzly!”

The gasps came from members of the elite squad. They rushed forward to drag their wounded leader out of danger.

Grizzly was no less a powerhouse than the captains of Tartarus company. None of them expected he would be so badly maimed going fist for fist. His whole right arm had been practically destroyed. Even if he survived, Grizzly would be forever crippled!

At least he could take heart in the fact that the horned man was also bleeding. Except, this copper-skinned, iron-boned monstrosity had just scraped his knuckles.

The Bloodsoaked Queen looked upon Grizzly as he wailed and cradled what was left of his hand. She looked on as one after the other, her elite soldiers were cut down like weeds. Each death fanned the flames of rage in her eyes. Was she not a prideful person? She had come from faraway lands to hunt and kill demons, but she hadn’t even managed to catch a glimpse of her prey. Now here she was, with men she found base and filthy dying to protect her!

She reached up to curl her fingers around the cross hanging from her neck.

Using her holy sword to eliminate a few mutants shouldn’t be too much to expect.

She knew, however, that summoning the blade would overtax her abilities. It meant she wouldn’t have any strength left over to protect herself against whatever foes may follow – not to mention the bastard still hidden somewhere in the shadows!

The circle of protection was shrinking. She saw her warriors dying by the moment and knew now was not the time for indecision. She gripped the necklace tight and prepared to yank it free.

The man in black spotted this minute detail. “Careful. She’s getting desperate…”

He didn’t finish his sentence. A scene completely outside of their expectations emerged, heralded by a roar that shook the heavens!

A vehicle came barreling through the fog of sand like a hellish lizard scrambling across the dunes. Destructive as a bulldozer, it ripped a path straight toward Blackflag Outpost, knocking countless sweepers or grinding them beneath its wheels. And it was headed right for the freak in black.

"Get fucked!"

Cloudhawk roared within the driver's seat, his crimson eyes fixed on his target. With utter disregard for everything he stomped hard on the accelerator. Before the freak could react it was plowed down and caught in the tread of several tires. No small number of sweepers were also reduced to roadkill as the iron lizard ripped through their ranks.

Cloudhawk lost control. The iron lizard pitched hard to its side and ripped itself apart against the unforgiving ground. This didn't stop its forward motion, however, and several pieces went barreling toward the horned mutant, standing stunned not far away.

"Arrrgghh!!"

The bull-like beast roared a challenge and flung his arms up defensively. But he was no match for several tons of twisted metal. He was caught in the tide of detritus that only came to a stop when it pulverized itself against a cluster of buildings. It wasn't clear whether the mutant survived.

Wide eyed and slack jawed, the winged man and the remaining sweepers gaped at what they'd just witnessed.

What in the hell?!

A bloody hand clawed out of the cabin. A young man in dingy ash-black fur armor clambered from the wreckage. He'd lived, but the gash in his head and the blood that covered him said he didn't escape without a price.

Cloudhawk shook his head to try and clear away his blurred vision. The first thing he saw was something pinned beneath the wheels of the iron lizard. It was the masked man.

"Goddamn- you still aren't dead? You *still* aren't dead?!"

He wasn't dead, but he wasn't far off, either. His lower body had been badly mangled by the vehicle's tires. His incredible healing was the only thing that kept him breathing.

"It's… it's you!"

The man in black pushed his body up with his right arm and glared at the child. He couldn't believe this mercenary punk had survived!

Cloudhawk stared back with eyes painted the color of blood. He pulled his exorcist staff free and began to drag himself forward. Step by step he lurched toward the man in black. He stared at the young man as he came closer, inch by agonizing inch. And as he did a sensation filled him, one that made the hairs on his neck stand on end. He had faced some of the fiercest creatures of the wasteland, but he'd never felt it until now.

Fear.

Chapter 49
The Last Frenzy

Cloudhawk's dramatic entrance had stunned everyone. This heedless, crazy action in a critical moment dealt with two of the enemy leaders. This kid was as crazy as he was lucky.

The man in black was pinned and couldn't move. The mask that concealed his face had broken away, revealing a hideously ugly visage beneath. He had all the humanoid features; eyes, a nose, a mouth. But all along his jaw and the ridge of his cheekbone there grew spindly threads of flesh. They were like miniature tentacles that spread from his face. They slithered across his countenance like they had a mind of their own.

The last leader standing, the winged youth, screamed and launched into the air. He dove for them, sword first.

Cloudhawk felt the danger, but he knew his foe was too fast for him to defend against. With singular focus he poured his will into the exorcist staff. Its tri-bladed head began to spin, gaining momentum with each step until it was kicking up sand!

Everyone – the man in black, the winged man, and the Bloodsoaked Queen – they all stared in wonderment.

"He's a demonhunter?!"

The two mutants were stunned. He was a kid, but he was a kid with an exorcist staff and that made everything different. Could Blackflag Outpost have another demonhunter?

The winged mutant's blade hung in the air for half a breath as he hesitated. In that moment a dark figure leapt from the ruins nearby, and almost unseen threw something toward him. Two scalpels, dripping with poison, whistled through the air. One was angled toward the jugular notch, and the other for his chest.

Mantis!

The assassin was a master at taking advantage of opportunities. The winged attacker was forced to break off his assault on Cloudhawk and turn his sword toward protecting himself. He succeeded in knocking the deadly scalpels away.

The power of the exorcist staff continued to gather to its peak. Tempestuous winds were kicked up all around Cloudhawk and his demon slaying weapon!

A ferocious and hateful look was smeared across the tentacle horror's face. He whipped his left hand and cast his bone-tipped feelers toward Cloudhawk. However, he'd been gravely injured, causing both his power and speed to suffer. Mantis reacted with another pair of flying knives that connected with two of the tentacles, knocking them away and helping Cloudhawk evade the danger.

Cloudhawk lifted his staff high. With eyes red as the pits of hell he brought the spinning blades down as hard as he could upon the man in black.

The mutant tried to protect himself with his right arm but the spinning blade would not be deterred. It ground against the limb, tearing through flesh and bone with the sound of half a dozen saws. The freak's arm was making a serviceable yet painful stand, stopping the exorcist staff from hitting anything vital.

"Are you angry?" The monster hissed in his gravelly tone. "Do you feel the hatred?" By now the man in black's other wounds had healed. Two slithering bone-tipped tentacles reeled back and struck at Cloudhawk like a pair of cobras. "You don't have what it takes to kill *me!* Die!"

Scenes flashed through Cloudhawk's mind.

The satisfied look in Woola's dull, dead eyes. Cooke's unreconciled sadness and anger. Mad Dog's silhouette as he welcomed death, and Slyfox's earnest look moments before his demise. Those eyes, that hatred, that figure, all of these things crystalized in a single moment in his mind.

Cloudhawk felt something surge within him, like a dam had burst. The sound of his exorcist staff drilling through his foe's arm increased, and the black man watched in agonizing terror as it tore his limb to ground flesh.

"Let's see who dies first!"

His exorcist staff became an all-conquering Excalibur. He thrust his staff through the

arm, into the freak's throat and deeper still into the earth beneath. The whirling blade made quick work of the mutant's neck and its hideous head rolled into the distance. A rapidly expanding pool of black blood soaked the ground.

Suddenly Cloudhawk was stabbed by a pain that radiated from his back. Two of the man in black's bone spurs dug themselves in. Thankfully they were weak, and the quality of his wolf pelt was good. The wounds were not too bad.

The winged man's eyes went wide with rage. "Big brother!"

Sweepers who'd witnessed the scene were struck dumb with amazement. In fact, so was the Bloodsoaked Queen! She felt like the notions she'd built herself on for the last decade were wrong. How could a heretic from the wastes be capable of wielding a demonhunter's weapon, and so capably at that?

His attack had been vicious and destructive. Not only did he summon the power of the relic, but his will surpassed any novice demonhunter she'd ever known. He was almost as good as a full-fledged member of the order.

Training a demonhunter in the elysian lands required significant time, resources and energy. No one had ever heard of a recruit mastering the craft in a matter of days – much less someone with his power and psychic strength. This was absolutely impossible!

The winged man's roars brought her and the sweepers back to the present. "Kill them!"

Mantis swept in and grabbed Cloudhawk, who was almost too weak to walk. Like a specter, he glided to her side. "I know a way. Follow or die."

There was no time to be stunned. Several elite soldiers, the badly wounded Grizzly, and the Queen where all who remained. They stumbled after Mantis, looking for escape.

The winged mutant gave up the chase. His first concern was his mangled brother. As he knelt down beside him, the winged man could see the tentacles on his neck and face twitching erratically. His mangled collarbones had sprouted many new tentacles as well.

The winged mutant let out a sigh of relief. The black-robed freak had almost perfect

healing powers and was a metahuman with an extremely complex internal structure. As a result, even though he had suffered a mortal wound that he wouldn't be able to recover from quickly, his cells and his organs would still remain active and lively for a period of time.

The winged man scooped up his head and brought it to its body. He held it close to the hacked remnants of his neck. The tentacles reaching from it were like worms with a scent for a feast. They slithered over each other and tugged the head tight while sickly flesh began to re-stitch itself. Tendons, vessels, and muscle regenerated before their very eyes.

Cloudhawk had *almost* killed him. Almost.

The crumbling protests of rock thundered around them as a boulder was thrust aside. The horned brother came stomping out from the ruins, looking worse than his wounds truly felt. His fuming gaze swept the area. “Where’d they go?”

“This is unbelievable!” The winged man had to keep helping his elder brother recover. He shouted over his shoulder at the horned man. “They couldn’t have fled far, get after them!”

The bull-like mutant gathered a group of thirty of forty sweepers and gave chase.

Blackflag Outpost was lost to the enemy. Everywhere one turned there were citizens fighting for their lives. There were more defenders than sweepers, but one on one they were no match. This was before considering the sweeper’s airship and its heavy guns. No one knew how many were mowed down, but the trickles of blood had become rivers.

“Enemies are everywhere, inside the walls and all around them,” said the crestfallen Grizzly. “How do we get out?”

Mantis acted like he heard nothing and continued to pick his way ahead without hesitation. As they continued suddenly they found the sand beneath them get kicked up by a buffeting wind. The sweeper airship was above them.

Grizzly looked up with dispirited surprise. “Not good!”

A spitfire crackle filled the air as its minigun burst to life. The area around them exploded into debris as bullets went flying. A few of the slower fighters fell to the

ground screaming, shooting geysers of blood from their wounds.

The airship had them pinned down!

Cloudhawk was so drained he was having trouble putting one foot in front of the other. Grizzly and the Bloodsoaked Queen were seriously injured. It made them slow and vulnerable. The enemy vessel descended to ten meters overhead and continued to spray the area with bullet fire. Escape was impossible.

Mantis continued at a full run, suddenly changing directions toward an excavation pit. These pits were where diggers did their name sake, searching for relics and other treasures. Most of the outpost's goods – be they vehicles, weapons or tools – came from pits like this. Many of them were dotted around the territory. This was shut down years ago when nothing of value was discovered.

That's where Mantis was going.

Some of these dig sites were honeycombs of secret passages that ran deep and far underground. They seemed to stretch on everywhere and pop up at various places through the outpost. Even Grizzly, after years of leading the elite squad, had no idea these were here.

The dwindling group filed into the tunnels, Sweepers nipping at their heels. Outside the horned mutant ripped off a corroded iron plate from some junk nearby and hurled it like a frisbee into the tunnel after them.

"*Agh*!"

The sheet of metal buried itself into one of the soldiers. It'd cut halfway through his waist before getting lodged.

"Shit! They're still after us!"

The survivors scowled. None of them wanted to accept that their enemies had caught up to them so fast. They fired a salvo of gunfire through the tunnel and several more defenders were killed. Mantis and the Queen immediately took over.

Grizzly was a fraction too slow and a bullet tore through his ankle. His towering body crashed into the ground with a thud.

“Grizzly!” Cloudhawk cried.

The Bloodsoaked Queen grabbed the big man and dragged him into cover.

Grizzly, soaked with sweat, gaped at her in astonishment. He was here, right next to her. In the year he’d served with her he’d never been this close.

The sweepers were closing in.

“I can walk on my own!” Cloudhawk pushed at Mantis as he felt his strength returning. “Go help Grizzly!”

“No, it’s not needed.” Grizzly swung his eyes to Cloudhawk and fixed him with a solemn gaze. “I’ll keep ‘em off you. Protect the Queen, and get the fuck outta here.”

Grizzly’s right arm was in splinters, as was his ankle. He knew that he’d only slow them down.

Mantis knew it too. He didn’t hesitate. The last Tartarus captain pulled Cloudhawk up and they fled down the tunnel. And although the Queen felt her chest tighten, she knew the truth when she saw it.

What she never knew was how he felt.

For a year Grizzly served as her loyal attendant. He was giving his life so they could run – trading it for the briefest chance she and the others could live. It weighed heavy on her.

The Queen couldn’t remember when she started pitying these barbarians. She’d grown up in the blessed country where they warned her constantly that the wastelands were full of evil. The people of god and the wretches of the wastelands were split by an impassable line. She was taught never to show the faithless mercy or sympathy.

Her experience in these blighted lands taught her that these unfortunate souls weren’t much different from the people where she came from.

Everyone was made from the same flesh and blood. Everyone loved, everyone loathed.

The cold fingers of dread closed around her heart: Was she questioning her faith? No…

no the word of the gods surpassed all else!

She looked back over her shoulder.

Grizzly had himself half-propped up, leaning on his good leg and looking back at her. For the briefest instant their eyes met and he felt like he was bathed in holy light. The look in her eyes set his soul ablaze.

This is enough, he thought. He was content to die for what he believed in. Could many in these cursed lands say the same?

Click!

A spout of fire danced from his lighter as Grizzly lit a cigarette. He seemed unperturbed as the shadow of an enormous horned monstrosity crept over him.

Grizzly sucked in a breath, making the tobacco crackle. He looked at the mutant with a calm and determined gaze, like a man standing vigil before the dawn. “I’m not lettin’ you through.”

The horned man curled his fist making his knuckles pop ominously. His dark eyes were thick with disdain. “Just you?”

“Yeah. Just me.” He plucked the cigarette from his lips and flicked it away. Keeping his eyes locked on the mutant he tore open his shirt to reveal a vest of homemade explosives. Half an inch of fuse sizzled as he grinned victoriously at his killer. “You’re goin’ down with me!”

The horned man’s pupils contracted to tiny dots. He screamed at those behind him.

“Retreat!”

The sweepers scrambled over one another to try and flee.

Grizzly erupted into peels of crazy laughter, full of pride and rage and madness. Tears had gathered at the corner of his eyes. He’d always been a man who kept his emotions tightly bound. He never wished for much, and kept his head out of fantasies. The Queen never knew because he didn’t want his filth to tarnish such a heavenly beauty.

I wish I could stay with you, doing your bidding. I wish I could protect you and be your

servant. An unworthy man was able to find salvation by dying for his faith. What is there to regret? Thank you, my Queen!

"Wulf, I'll see ya in a minute!" Grizzly let loose with his final roar of defiance before the vest detonated. The explosion tore through the tunnel's supports and collapsed a huge section. Sweepers that were too slow to escape were crushed beneath a mountain of rubble.

Chapter 50
Dreams

The only one who knew about Grizzly's suicide vest was Grizzly himself. No one expected him to blow himself up to stop their pursuers.

Cloudhawk, Mantis, and the Bloodsoaked Queen were far enough away to escape the blast radius. The horned mutant and many of his sweepers were not so lucky. The explosion caused the whole area to collapse in on itself. Detritus poured into the ruined tunnels like a deluge. Those who were too slow were buried alive.

The horned man was caught in the collapsed ruin and couldn't wriggle himself free. Buried beneath tons of garbage the mutant was stuck, despite his supernatural strength. The more he struggled the smaller his coffin became. His physique kept him from being crushed, but it did not free him from the ticking clock of depleting oxygen. Strong as the mutant was he still relied on air like any living creature, and it was becoming thinner by the moment.

Minutes marched by. Breathing became more difficult. The horned man struggled against the dimness that had begun to creep into his vision, all the while incredulous that he should be caught this way. He was getting weaker. Was this how he would die?

His oxygen-deprived mind summoned memories from the past. He was a child, an orphan who knew nothing about who his parents were much less what they were like. Ever since he could remember the horned man was a large and imposing mutant, different even among others of his kind. He'd held on to his intellect and humanity in addition to his superhuman physique.

The horned youth's intelligence didn't change how normal humans treated him. Given the derogatory name Longhorn, [1], he was hunted wherever he went and the specter of being caught and killed always hung over him. More times than he could count he had to humiliate himself to survive. He'd lost track of the times he was nearly killed, and each time he made himself harder.

The mutant child grew up, grew strong. Eventually he was able to stand on his own, and even attracted a small group of dimwitted stragglers. It was his first sweeper

colony, and he turned against any scavengers or excavators they came across.

Yet no matter how strong he became or how many sweepers he gathered around him, Longhorn was not content. The imbeciles he commanded couldn't hold a conversation, much less provide companionship. For a long time he was convinced he would live out his days as a pariah, a lone wolf licking his wounds day in and day out.

This world, this time, this place – it was full of hostilities, enemies at every turn. Even the wasteland rejected him, for he was a mutant!

Until one day.

A man clad in mystical armor appeared before him. Right away he recognized the stranger as one of them – the root of all evil here in the world. It was their race that destroyed the planet, who men far and wide feared with every fiber of their being. But Longhorn had been alone all this time, adrift in a sea of self-pity and hopelessness… and suddenly, safe harbor seemed to appear before him.

"I can see the confusion and defiance in your eyes. You are one of only a few I've come across with the talent I need, with the ability to do great things. Come with me and your days of wretchedness will be behind you."

"I will rule these wastelands. Together we will create a kingdom, a place for people like you and I. We will be a haven for those that fate was conspired against – succor for those who have known cruelty and despair. This will be my dynasty."

The mutant gladly accepted this charge. Ever since that day Longhorn was the most eager to give himself in service to his king. In his name he fought, spreading his influence far and wide. Whatever his master's bidding, he obeyed. Over time their coterie expanded and more like him joined their cause. Though they came from different walks of life they all shared something.

A dream. They were chasing the most precious thing left in the wasteland, a dream of something better.

It was what separated man from beast. An animal was content so long as it had food enough to fill its belly, a safe place to sleep and a pack of its own. Animals didn't worry about what the future held, ignorant of the impulses that kept them going. Longhorn had lived like an animal for years, and his master had given him the choice to regain his dignity.

Master was sure to succeed. He was different than all the others, destined for greatness.

Longhorn had dedicated himself to his savior's lofty ambitions, giving his strength and his life to see it become a reality. He'd helped to create a Promised Land where people like him could thrive, under a leader who valued them. If this was his time to die, he had no regrets.

But he was not yet resigned! Still, his iron will would not protect him from suffocation. He was getting dizzy, his mind muddled. He only held on because he could not accept death. Then, suddenly, a flicker of light shone throne the darkness.

Scrrratch, clack! The rubble was moved aside. A hand extended down toward him.

"Second brother, you still breathing? Hurry up and get out of there!"

Longhorn raised his head to see his winged brother, Vulture [2] peering back. The young mutant helped pull him from the ruins. When he was finally extricated Longhorn still couldn't tell how long he'd been buried. The battle for Blackflag Outpost was over, and the sprawling human encampment was now nothing more than a crumbling mausoleum. Most of its citizens lay dead or dying, and the rest had fled into the unforgiving wastes.

Their afflicted brother, Stranger Black [3], sat nearby. His neck was a mess of tendrils slithering over one another as flesh knit itself back in place. His vocal cords had not regenerated yet, so he sat in silence. He didn't need to speak. All three of them shared the same disbelief that the Bloodsoaked Queen had eluded them.

"How could the outpost have another demonhunter…" Vulture was clearly puzzled by Cloudhawk's sudden appearance. "He isn't strong yet. I wonder why they would dispatch him here? It doesn't make sense!"

Longhorn and Stranger Black were just as mystified.

Exorcist staffs were standard equipment in the blessed lands for novice demonhunters. Cloudhawk's skills were lacking, but his explosive power had taken them by surprise. Stranger Black had suffered terribly because it was so unexpected.

No matter what, the Bloodsoaked Queen had to be slaughtered!

She'd already managed to uncover their master's identity and his whereabouts. If she

survived the wastelands and was allowed to get word back to the elysian lands they could expect an influx of demonhunters. For now, the situation was too uncertain for their king to show himself. Chasing down these despicable humans and tearing out their hearts was left to these three mutants.

Longhorn took deep, panting gasps. “Send people out in all directions. No matter where they run or what hole they hide in, we will hunt them down, even if we have to dig through every inch of the wilderness! Elder brother can put out a bounty calling every hunter, mercenary and assassin in the area. We’ll turn the whole damn wastelands against them!”

His orders were quickly spread among the sweepers. They quickly skittered out of the Outpost and out into the deadly wastes.

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Night finally arrived. Mantis, Cloudhawk and the Bloodsoaked Queen scrambled out of a hole they’d dug for themselves. They were only a few kilometers away from the ruins of Blackflag Outpost, still within dangerous territory. They couldn’t stay long. They had to keep pressing into the endless wasteland.

Cloudhawk was on the verge of collapse, and the Bloodsoaked Queen’s name was more literal than figurative as she struggled with the wound in her leg. Travel was slow going, and so they’d found temporary shelter in a valley.

No food, no water, and no medicine. The survivors had nothing with which to face the harsh wilds. Cloudhawk and the Queen were gravely wounded, and death was just as likely to claim them before their pursuers caught up.

Mantis left to find supplies. Cloudhawk and the Queen remained behind to rest.

The wasteland became frigid at night, a cold that sunk deep into one’s bones. Of course a fire was out of the question. The beasts of the wilds didn’t fear fire, on the contrary it gave away their position.

The mutants were surely keeping their eyes trained for a campfire, too. By now there had to be sweepers everywhere looking for them. Anything that pointed to their location was asking for death.

Cloudhawk looked over his wounds. While they weren't to be ignored, at least they weren't deathly serious. With his healing capabilities he figured he'd be fine in a few days. His eyes wandered over to the Queen, and for some reason he couldn't help but voice criticism. "This all happened because you completely overestimated yourself! Why the hell did you run out here by yourself to try and kill a demon! We haven't even seen the damn thing's shadow, but a few of its lackies almost beat the shit out of you!"

He'd struck a nerve. She stared back at him in anger, and with a small measure of shame. "I've spent the last year searching. I only just recently discovered where he's hiding. He reacted too fast, I didn't have time to call for help from my people."

"Slyfox, Mad Dog, Grizzly and a whole lot of other people are *dead* because of you!" His anger boiled over as he asked, "You really don't feel guilty for any of that? Why are our lives any less important than yours, huh? What makes you think you're any better than us! What?!"

Cloudhawk was furious. Thousands of innocent citizens had been massacred. Mad Dog, Slyfox, Woola and countless others hadn't been able to get away, but they were. The demon might have wielded the sickle, but the Queen's pride was what brought him here in the first place!

She opened her mouth as though to respond, but instead a mouthful of blood sputtered forth. Her internal injuries were bad.

"Whatever, we'll clear this up later. Our goal is the same, no point in helping the enemy by fighting each other." When he saw how sorry of a state she was in, Cloudhawk's anger dissipated. "You've been shot, if we don't get the pellet out it could be dangerous. Let me help you."

The Bloodsoaked Queen had suffered from this disaster, too. She was no longer able to maintain her aura of indifferent arrogance. In fact, she didn't even have the strength to rebut Cloudhawk's arguments. She nodded.

He helped her remove her outer garments. The shot to her shoulder had been blocked by her sturdy armor. Thanks to its protection and her sturdy constitution the bullet only lodged in her skin and hadn't done any damage to the bones beneath. It didn't look like it would limit the use of her arm.

As for her leg, the bullet had missed anything vital. The wound was a nasty one, but

the Queen used her impressive body control to constrict blood vessels to the area. She wasn't in any danger of bleeding out.

Cloudhawk used a dagger to dig the bullet from her shoulder, then sutured the wound with a needle he carried with him. Not once did the Queen register any pain on her face. It was like she didn't feel anything at all.

Neither bullet wound was as bad as it looked. The real worry was her internal injuries, but Cloudhawk didn't have an answer for those.

For a few moments there was silence, and then the Queen spoke up. "How were you able to use the power of the staff?"

"Hell if I know," he muttered dismissively. "What? Is it supposed to be hard? Just you fancy-ass Elysians can use relics, not us wastelanders, is that it?" Clearly, Cloudhawk was currently feeling quite a bit of resentment towards the gods and their followers.

The Bloodsoaked Queen didn't argue. Instead, she took a few calming breaths. "If you're able to use the exorcist staff, it means you have the potential to become a demonhunter. It means you've been blessed by the gods, and that makes you different from other people in the wastelands. If we live, there's a chance you could be allowed into the elysian lands…"

Really? The realm of the gods would take him in? Fleeing this wretched place had always been Cloudhawk's dream. Memories of his fallen comrades filled him with a sense of duty, though – the first thing he had to do was kill the one responsible!

Suddenly he heard footsteps approaching. They were coming from all around.

A host of silhouettes separated from the inky darkness. Weapons glinted in their hands.

Cloudhawk's face hardened. "Fuck! Someone's here, we gotta hide!"

1. The author doesn't specify this is his name. Up to this point he is only referred to as 'brother' in conversation, and described as 'Bull-Horned Brute'. I've chosen to give him the name Longhorn to facilitate the translation. Aside from being close enough in approximation to his name in the translation, it is also a common type of cow in the United States where this story purportedly takes place. Texas longhorn cattle are a common site in their namesake, and longhorn bison used to roam the wilds before

going extinct. It seemed a fitting moniker.

2. Again, not his given name. ‘Two-Winged Youth’ doesn’t play. Cherub is closest but he’s hardly angelic, and Icarus is too loaded with history. Vulture seemed most appropriate considering his negative appeal.

3. ‘Black Robed Freak’ in Chinese.

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